BHIMAYANA

EXPERIENCES OF UNTOUCHABILITY

An extraordinary book...
A conference of corporeal experience across generations, full of pain and empathy.
JOHN BERGER

Unusually beautiful.
Unforgettable.
ARUNDHATI ROY

raphic Novels

. Durgabai

navayana

SHOUT IT
SHARE

BHIMAYANA

incidents in the life of

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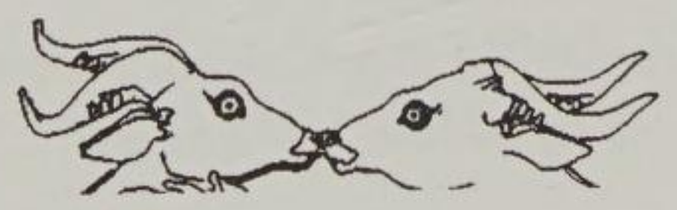

navayana

to the memory of
Jangarh Singh Shyam (1960–2001)
the sky that sheltered us

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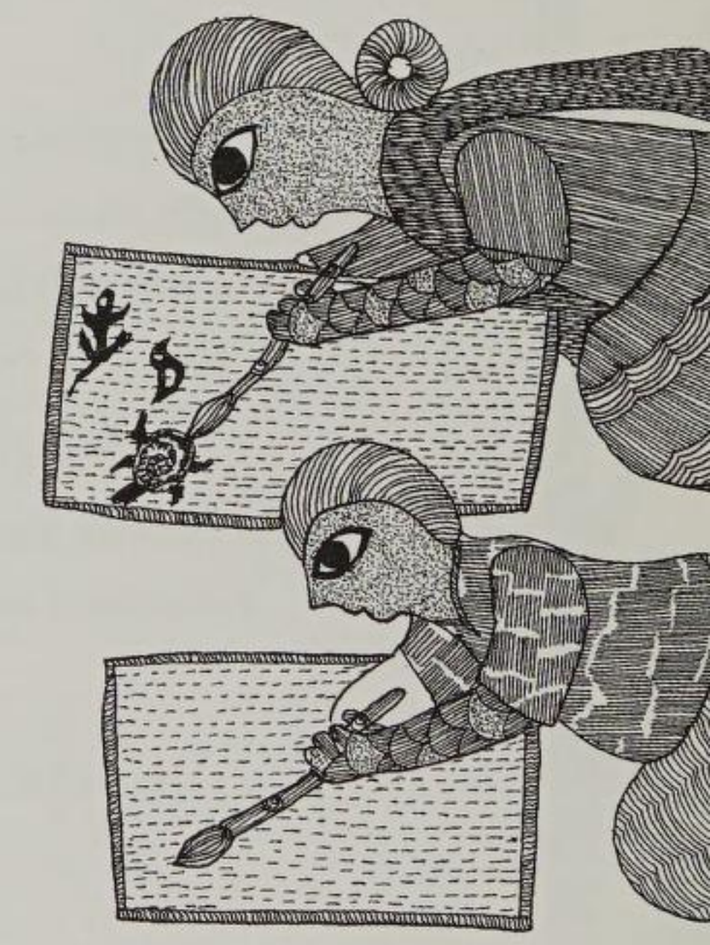


FOREWORD

I want to try to say something about the way this extraordinary book tells its story.

During the 19th and 20th centuries History was confronted and visualized as a stage: a stage on which women and men struggled to choose and achieve their destiny and a life in which there was more justice; their struggles were inspired and accompanied by the words of visionaries, political thinkers and active politicians, some of them wielding power, others subversive. Such an Historical stage with its proscenium arch, its regular seats set out as in an amphitheatre, its dramatic lighting and acoustics, was present in poems, written stories, political meetings, insurrections, songs, shared dreams. Today no longer.

The imagined theatre has been destroyed by so-called Communication Experts, the media, politicians without a future, and a global economic system which reduces the whole of History and every horizon of life to the pursuit of profit. On the site of the stage there is today a Shopping Mall.

Yet, in fact, History continues and the struggles persist. And so we face the challenge of how to tell stories about them across the world today.

This book offers a prophetic answer and it is this: replace the stage of History with the Body of a community. A body with a long past, a present of many voices, and a vision of the future. Reading the book and following its story, we enter this body, its bloodstream, its organs, its members.

No more proscenium arch. No more rectangular framing or unilinear time. No more profiled individuals. Instead, a conference of corporeal experience across generations, full of pain and empathy, and nurtured by a complicity and endurance that can outlive the Market.

Stories are being told like this all over the world. They are seldom printed and published. This book has now set an example.

Let us thank everyone who contributed to it for that example.

JOHN BERGER
26 July 2010
Taninges, France

ONE DAY IN THE RECENT PAST, A BUS STOP IN AN INDIAN CITY...

Super-qualified. Stuck in a dead-end job. That's my life...

I blame these damn job **quotas** for Backward and Scheduled Castes. It isn't fair!

Well... caste isn't fair.

Hey— you're talking like one of **them**...

Caste isn't real any longer. It's a non-issue.

What if I am one of **them**?

Funny, people keep saying caste isn't real, but caste never seems to go away.

Take Khairlanji, for instance—

What's that? And what's it got to do with **me**?

All I care about is that I have no job. All because of caste quotas. My merit does not count.

I guess you can afford not to know about Khairlanji. It is one of thousands of incidents of brutality against Dalits.

Although the Bhotmanges were poor Dalits, their education and assertion of their right to a life of dignity was enough to 'provoke' violence.

Surekha, Priyanka, Roshan and Sudhir – members of the Bhotmange family – were bludgeoned to death in full view of people of the village. Their bodies were dumped in a canal.

TENSION AFTER DALITS DRAW WATER FROM WELL

KOLHAPUR, HINDUSTAN TIMES, 29 SEPT 2010

On the face of it, Ghungurwadi village in Shahuwadi Taluk, Maharashtra, named after social reformer-king Rajashri Shahu Maharaj, should be setting an example for the upliftment of the socially downtrodden. But Dalits here are still subjected to discrimination. On September 20, one act of the Dalits from Ghungur put an end to nearly 60 years of discrimination. Narsu Kamble, his cousin Sugriv Kamble, along with several other members of the community, fetched drinking water from a well meant for the Marathas. Irked, members of the upper caste denounced the act and boycotted the water from the well.

Two Dalit teenagers were assaulted, tied with ropes and then dragged for several meters by a group of villagers in Uttar Pradesh's Rae Bareli district on charges of **stealing a mobile phone** kept in a vehicle, police said Monday. Ajai Nat (15) and Ravishankar Raidas (14), residents of Lachminia village, some 80 km from Lucknow, were accused of stealing a mobile phone on Sunday evening from the truck of Balbir Singh, who has a transport business in the village. When Singh failed to recover the mobile from them, he called three of his associates, and together they beat up the teenagers with wooden sticks and also shaved their heads. Thereafter, both the teenagers were tied with ropes and dragged for several meters in the village. "We came to know about the incident on

HONOUR KILLING SHOCKS THE CAPITAL

NEW DELHI, MAIL TODAY, 15 JUNE 2010

In an incident that could send shockwaves across the **Capital**, a 19-year-old girl and her boyfriend were allegedly **bludgeoned and electrocuted to death** by her family in Swaroop Nagar in north-west Delhi around midnight on Sunday. Asha Saini and her [Dalit] boyfriend Yogesh Jatav (also 19) were kept away from each other by the girl's family after their relationship was discovered. Both were reportedly from different castes. Asha, a resident of Gokulpuri in north-east Delhi, was sent to her uncle Om Prakash's house in Swaroop Nagar around a fortnight ago but Yogesh managed to somehow meet his girlfriend on Sunday night.

ROW OVER 'UNTOUCHABLE' INDIAN DOG

MORENA (MADHYA PRADESH), BBC NEWS, 24 SEPT 2010

Police in India are investigating claims that a Dalit woman has been ordered to pay compensation to the high-caste owners of a dog she fed. The woman says the village council wants her to pay a fine of 15,000 rupees ($330) for feeding the dog, which the owners have now kicked out. The incident took place in Malikpur village in Morena district in Madhya Pradesh state. "I made some roti and gave to the dog. After I had to my husband who works in a farm. After I had said the him, we had some leftovers which I gave to the dog. Sheru said 'You've the Dalit woman, Sunita Jatav, said. She saw her leading owner of the dog, Amrutlal Kirari, saw her and said 'You've become an untouchable now.'" dog, it has become an untouchable now," Jatav said Mr Kirari left the dog, a black mongrel called Sheru, tied to a pole outside her house on Monday, the

JUST ANOTHER RAPE STORY

SABRINA BUCKWALTER

TIMES OF INDIA, 29 OCT 2006

The village of **Khairlanji**, near Nagpur, is an unremarkable settlement of brick huts and cement houses. Less than 200 families live here. Dirt roads run between flat farmlands, and the eye sees great sprawling distances. There was always a gaping silence in this village, even before September 29 when an upper caste mob, according to eyewitnesses, paraded a mother and her 17-year-old daughter naked, raped and killed them. Two other members of the family, brothers aged 19 and 21, too were murdered. Their bodies were dumped in a canal. Thirty-eight men have been arrested and they are being held in police custody. The gruesome incident occurred **780 km from Mumbai**, too far out it appears to muster national outrage. The news of this brutality did not enter the mainstream news in any significant fashion...

DALIT KILLED FOR DEMANDING WAGE

THE TIMES OF INDIA, NEW DELHI MONDAY, AUGUST 3, 2009

A
Madhya Pra
wanted paym
him—but what h
Ramesh Jatav wa
demanded Rs 4,000
farmer Shriram
Thirty-eight-year
night on Friday nig

Untouchability alive & kicking in India

Dalits Have Little Access To Temples, Their Kids Are Made To Sit Separately In School

AMBEDKAR: HIS STATUES OUTNUMBER GANDHI'S AND NEHRU'S,
BUT FEW PEOPLE KNOW ABOUT HIS LIFE OR WORK...

I'd read **Ambedkar** if I were you. I'd want to understand what happened in Khairlanji, and why two Dalits are killed every day in India.

Ambed- who? The guy in all those **statues?**

ON 14 APRIL 1891, HE WAS BORN IN A MAHAR FAMILY, THE FOURTEENTH CHILD OF BHIMABAI AND RAMJI SAKPAL.

And a mahar is...?

I forgot— you're from the south. People of the mahar caste were among the untouchables in western India, like paraiyars and malas in the south,

GOING THROUGH THE VILLAGE EVERY DAY TO CLEAN OUT ITS FILTH,

LIVING ON THE EDGE OF THE VILLAGE,

DOING LABOUR FOR WHICH THEY COULD EXPECT NO PAYMENT...

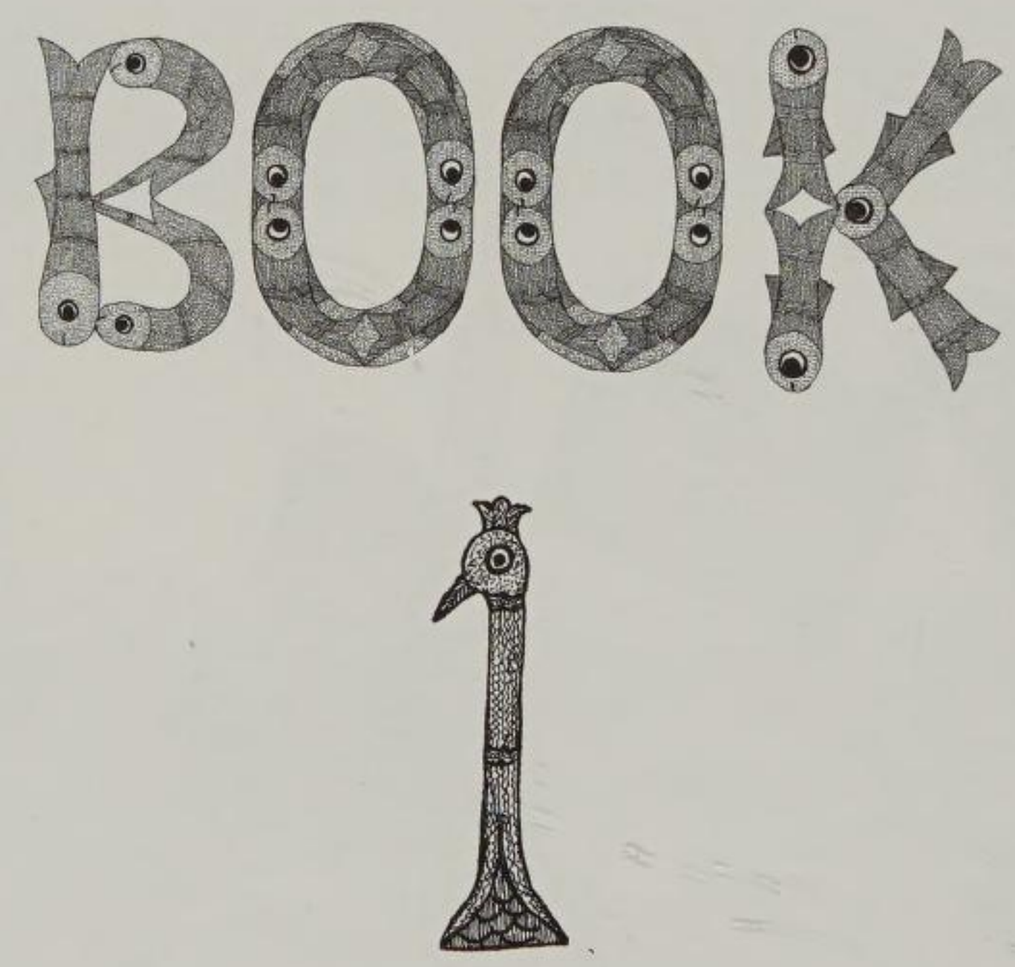
This was how Dalits across India lived for a long, long time...

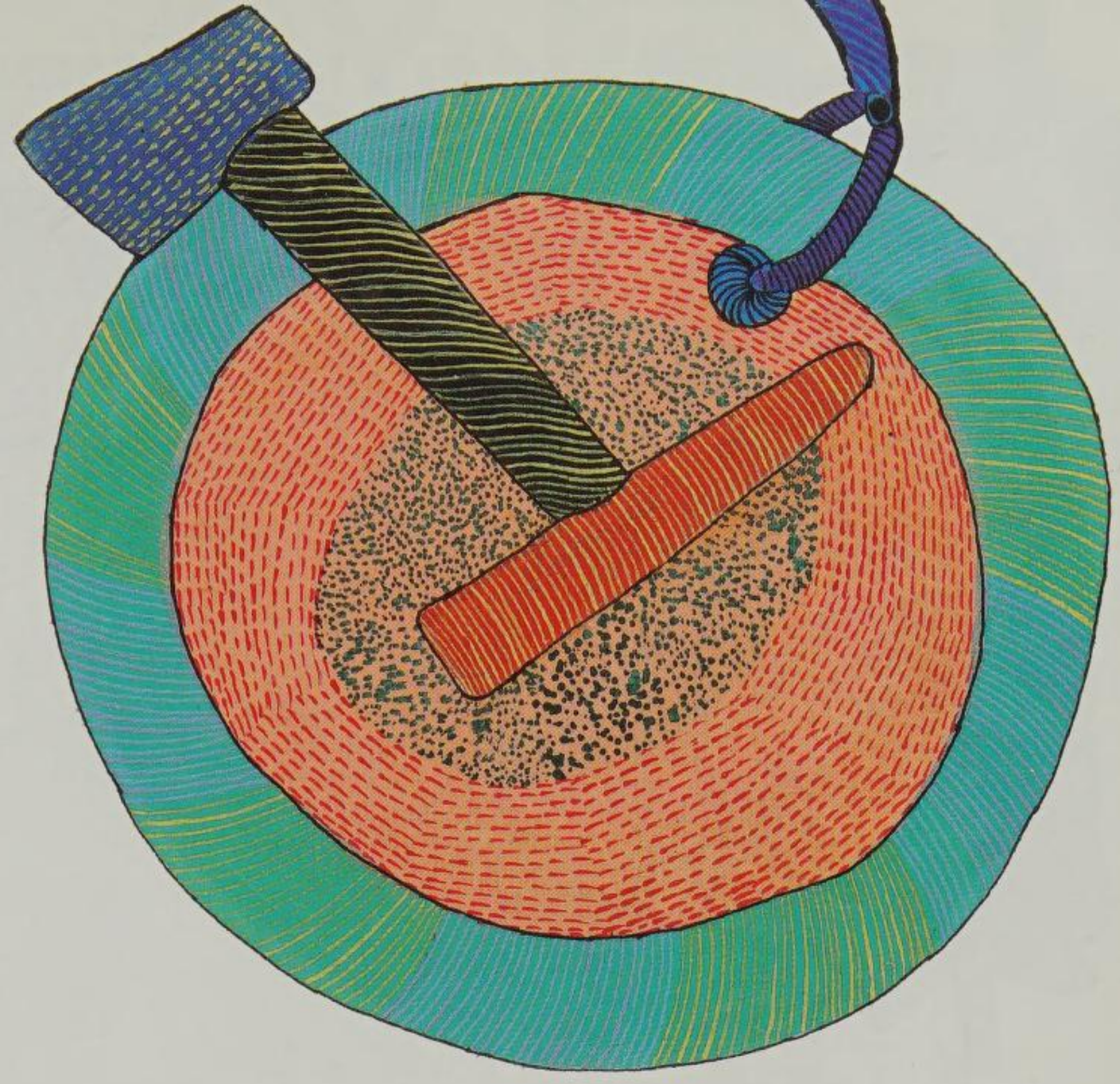
BUYING SPICES AND OIL AT HINDU SHOPS STANDING OUTSIDE THE DOOR...

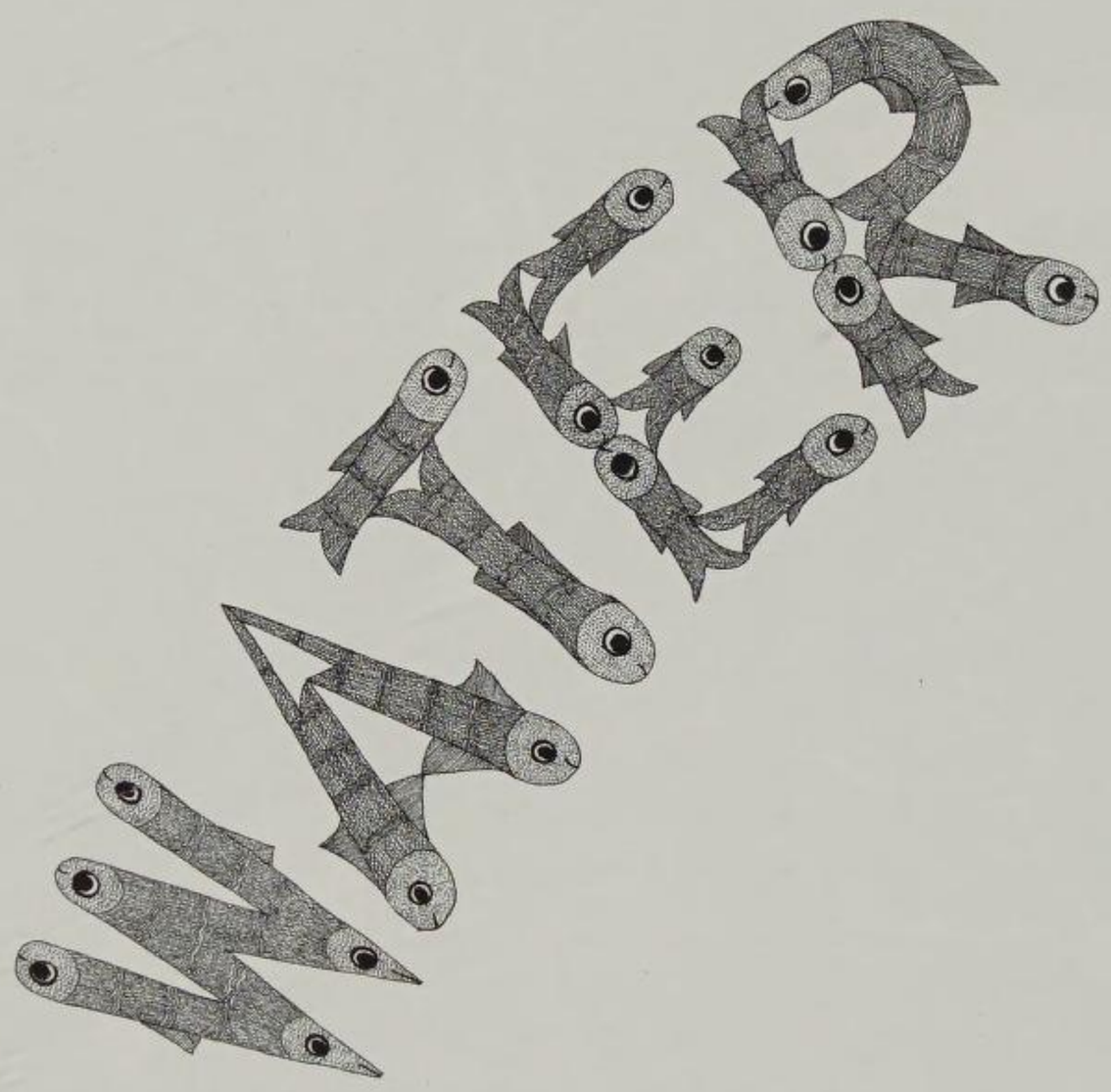
COLLECTING FOOD AT THE BACKDOORS OF HINDU HOUSES...

RUNNING ERRANDS FOR THE VILLAGE FOLK...

YOUNG **BHIM AMBEDKAR** WAS NOT THE WORST OFF AMONG THEM, BUT HE LEARNT BITTER LESSONS ABOUT CASTE.


BOOK




WATER

1901. A SCHOOL IN SATARA, A TOWN IN WESTERN INDIA.

Join us?

But I'm not supposed to!

10-YEAR OLD BHIM SITS APART.
HE'S THINKING OF THE BELL...

Sir, may I drink some water?

Bhim! Always a nuisance! Can't you wait until the bell rings?

When the bell rings, all the other students go to the tap. By the time they finish, the peon has gone home. And I'm not supposed to touch the tap.

Well, naturally. You're a **mahar!** If you cut your hair more often, you'd feel less thirsty. You look as if there are no barbers in Satara.

But doesn't he **know?** Barbers won't **touch** us mahars....

Now
off you go.
I'm done pumping
water... Go on,
dammit!

I've waited
for my turn. And
my home is a long
walk from here.

Sir, the peon won't give me water.

What's up, Nayak? Just give him some water and be done with it!

You **know** I can't let him near the tap like other kids. I've got to fill a pitcher and then pour it for him. And I have other work to do!

Damn and blast the **stupid** British government for letting untouchables study in the same schools as well-born boys. White folks haven't a clue about our beliefs.

Step back **now!** And when you leave, take your gunny-sack with you—the sweeper won't touch it, and the place won't get cleaned.

THE HEART OF WATER IS GENEROUS AND REACHES THE VERY ROOTS
ITS HEALING TOUCH MAKES THE SCABS OF A THOUSAND SORROWS FALL
WHAT WALLS, HOW MANY WALLS, CAN YOU BUILD AROUND WATER
HOW WILL YOU SHACKLE THE RUSHING FORM OF WATER?*

*from Namdeo Dhasal's "Water" in Golpitha. Trans. from the Marathi by Dilip Chitre

THEY HAVE BRUSHES FOR THE BUFFALO AND SHEARS FOR THE GOAT
THEY WON'T TRIM A MAHAR'S HAIR—THEY'D RATHER CUT HIS THROAT.

BOYS AT THE WELL, EVEN BEASTS AT THE TROUGH,
MAY DRINK TILL THEY BURST.
BUT THE VILLAGE TURNS A DESERT
WHEN I TRY TO QUENCH MY THIRST.

Bhim! You're back early today. Is everything all right?

Mira Aunty, why can't I just open a tap and drink water like all the other boys?

Every day you have to ask me this? You know why. Because you're untouchable, boy. Let's not go into...

Why? I am cleaner than them!

Sssh, if you say such things, you'll get into trouble.

Stop complaining. You're lucky...

"YOUR GRANDFATHER MALOJI SAKPAL LEFT DAPOLI AND JOINED THE WHITE PEOPLE'S ARMY,

"AND YOUR FATHER RAMJI FOLLOWED IN HIS FOOTSTEPS AND WAS PROMOTED TO SUBEDAR,

"OR WE'D STILL BE TAKING OUT GARBAGE FROM THE VILLAGE."

Never mind all that. You must be hungry.

I'll buy some rice and mutton. And drop in at Manju-didi's so she can cut my hair. When Balram's back, we'll cook pulau.

All you boys get to eat is pulau. Shame my legs are so bad. What wouldn't I give to be a proper mother to my motherless nephews!

Baba always says you look after us. Has he written?

Oh yes, he has. He says he's building a new tank in Goregaon, for the government. To help people after the famine. He can't take time off... But he says you kids are to spend your **summer vacation in Goregaon!**

Whee! So we'll go by train! I can't wait to tell Balram. But I'd better go to the market now...

THERE, MY FATHER IN GOREGAON IS HELPING BUILD A WATER TANK FOR FAMINE-STRICKEN PEOPLE WHO WOULD DIE IF IT WEREN'T FOR HIS WORK. AND **HERE,** I CAN'T GET WATER TO DRINK AT SCHOOL.

FOR THE TOUCHABLE FOLK, ONE SET OF RULES, FOR US ANOTHER. NO WATER FOR US FROM PUBLIC TAPS. NO HAIRCUTS FROM THE BARBER. NO WASHING BY THE WASHERMEN. THEY WOULDN'T TOUCH OUR CLOTHES, EVEN IF WE PAID DOUBLE. ANIMALS ENJOY MORE FREEDOM.

Manju-didi, you are the best barber in town!

2 WEEKS LATER...

SATARA

सतारा

Don't go to the edge of the platform! The train will crush you...

Balram! Stop admiring the train... get the tickets.

Don't panic Aunty!

It'll leave without us. Hurry up!

Four tickets to **Masur**, please!

Can I have the **green** drink please?

That'll be two annas!

Arrey! Already spending your money on **rubbish!**

Balram, Bhim—take care of your little brothers, your poor dead sister's motherless ones! Who's got the food basket?

Don't lose your **new** caps! Don't scuff your **new** shoes, and don't kick the **gold** borders of your **new** dhotis with them.

Who's got the letter your father wrote with all the instructions?

I've got it, Mira Aunty, and please stop worrying!

Keep it in the envelope, or the ink will stain your **new** shirt. Remember the shirt is from the **white people's shop!**

Masur, don't forget to get off at Masur!

Don't forget to look out for your Baba's peon! Tell your Baba I send blessings! Oh, I will **die** of grief!

Oh my boys! Leaving me here **alone...**

Aunty, the neigh-bours will take care of you!

Oh, I will be so lonely!

TOWNS WITH MAGICAL NAMES FLASH BY—
BHIM'S HEART IS A BIRD IN A CLOUDLESS SKY.

MASUR
मसूर

Here comes our station. Let's get off quick.

"THE CLOCK'S TICKING AWAY! WHERE'S BABA? MAYBE HE'S SENDING HIS PEON...

"OR MAYBE HE'S FORGOTTEN. BUT I'M SURE I POSTED THE LETTER THAT SAID WHEN WE WERE COMING."

There's the train! Hope there are folk who want to travel beyond Masur. Haven't had a customer in **days**.

"LOOK! THE STATION MASTER! MAYBE HE'LL HELP US..."

Everyone's left. What are **you** waiting for? Hasn't anyone come for you?

We've got to get to Goregaon. We're waiting for our father or his peon to take us there.

But no one seems to be coming...

You look like smart kids. You also seem to have money—why don't you go to Goregaon?

We don't know how to get there.

Hmm... you look like you're from a **good family!** Let's find someone to help you boys...

Maybe my wife can take you in for tonight— I'll find out... So, you boys are from?

From Satara.

All the way from Satara? And your family?

We are mahars.

Untouchables! Who'd have believed it looking at you... I want you boys out of here. What are you going to do?

Maybe a cart can get us to Goregaon. Help us please!

Oh **Bhim!** Did you have to say we were **mahars?** Now he's gone away. I bet he won't come back.

We had so much fun this morning—what happened to all that? How did everything change?

Here, you! I managed to get a cart-man to give you a ride to Goregaon. The cart drivers said they would rather **starve** than take you. You'll have to pay **double** the fare...

Hey, are you sure they are **mahars?** They're dressed real nice, like **brahmins!** Anyhow, they'll pay double the fare... One more thing—can one of them drive the cart?

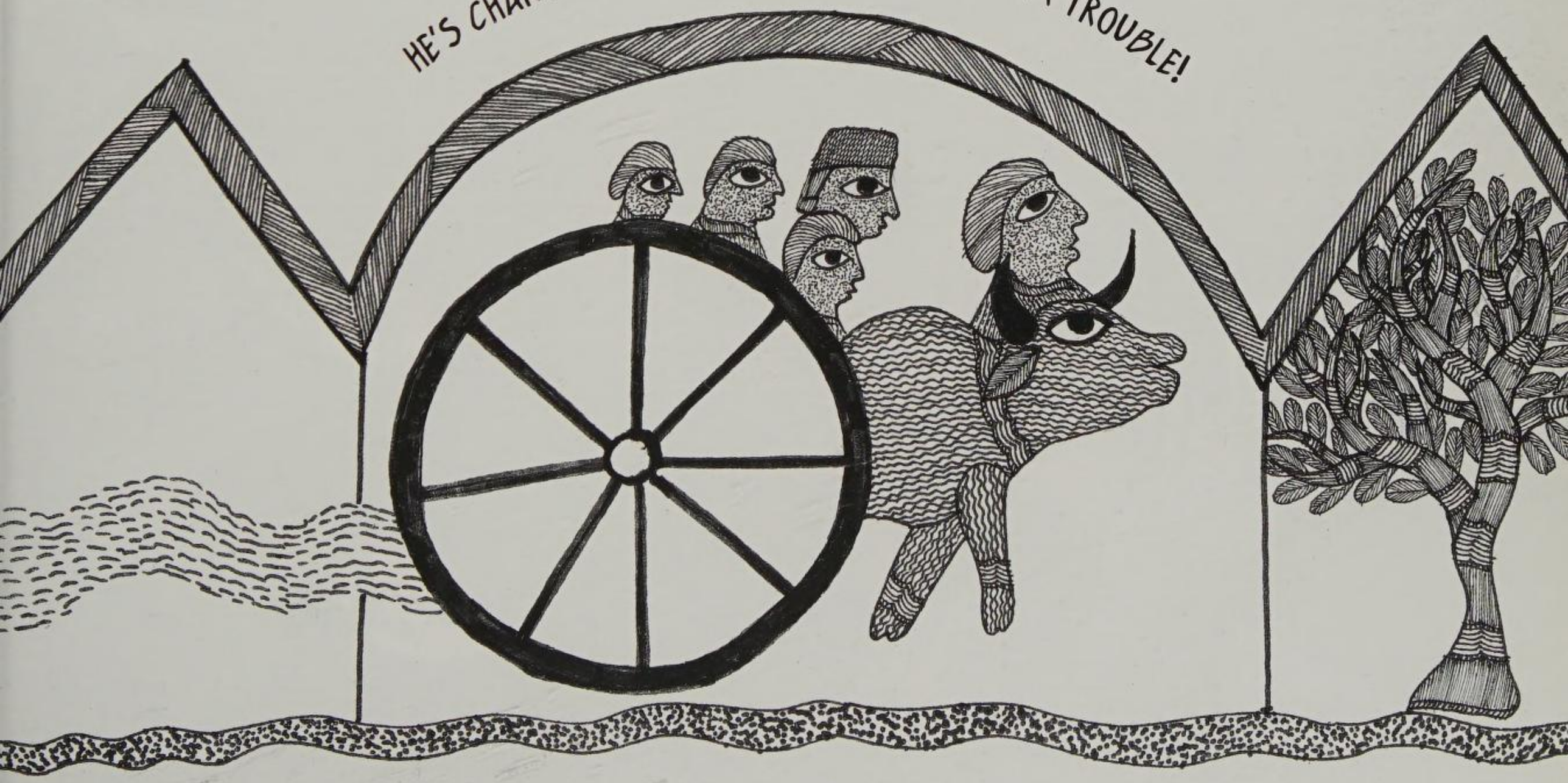
They'll pay double **and** they'll drive the cart. Laxman, you can walk along, behind the cart. That way you won't be **polluted.**

Yes, I can.

What?

Sssh... We've got to get out of here.

HE'D RATHER NOT RIDE, HE'D LOSE HIS PRIDE,
HE'S CHARGING US DOUBLE FOR CAUSING HIM TROUBLE!



You should stop here and eat. There's no water anywhere else on the way.

I'll go eat in the village. Give me half the fare now, so I can pay for my grub. Keep an eye on the cart.

Look at that... it's a cattle-pool. The water stinks. We can't drink it. That's it, let's wait for the driver.

It's spicy! I'll get some water to wash it down.

Thank god Mira Aunty and the neighbours packed us this food.

Looks tasty!

I'm starving.

Come back soon!

AN HOUR LATER...

DUSK DEEPENS TO NIGHT; IN THE SILENCE WE HEAR
CARTWHEELS CREAKING, HEARTS KNOCKING WITH FEAR.

THE DARK ROAD WINDS ROUND,
SOARS UP, SWOOPS DOWN,
AND OUR EYES ACHE
FOR THE LIGHTS OF A TOWN.

Arrey! How come he's willing to be polluted now?

Sssh... We'll worry about that later! Let's get to Goregaon first.

I'm scared. I wish Grandpa was here.

I'm scared too—it's been a lot more than three hours since we left Masur. D'you think... the driver—could he be taking us someplace lonely to... k-kill us and rob us?

We'll have to be careful —we're wearing these gold chains...

Ji, how far still to Goregaon?

Not very far, we'll be there soon. Do you see that light? That's the toll-collector's place. We'll rest there for the night.

It must be midnight! We still haven't reached the light!

The kids are asleep. Have we gone off the road?

Here we are—the hill hid the light from us. God, what a fuss you boys are making! Listen...

the toll-man is a Hindu. Don't tell him you are mahars. Say you are Muslims and try your luck if you want water.

re ing t— e up!

Is it Goregaon? I'm so hungry and thirsty.

Could we have some water to drink, please?

We are Muslims.

Who are you? And where are you from?

Nice try! I've no water here. There is water on the hill, if you want to go and get it. Now sod off, so I can get get some sleep.

It's so unfair—we have food, but can't eat it because no one will give us water!

THROUGH THE NIGHT WE RODE,
AND ON THROUGH THE DAWN,
HOME RECEDING BEFORE US LIKE THE HORIZON.

GOR
गो

AT LAST...

Which way to Ramji Sakpal's house?

Third street to the left. Last house on the right.

Kiran-ji! Nobody came to meet us at the station! Is Baba all right? Didn't you get our letter?

Er... well, let me call your father.

What a **surprise!** You boys never told me when you were coming! **How** did you get here from Masur?

But **Baba**, I wrote, and **posted** the letter! Your peon **Kiran** must have surely received it.

Nonsense—I'd have come to meet you if you had written...

Kiran would have given it to me—**Kiran**? Where is the man? Good god...

The letter must have been kept from you, Baba.

I'd better clear out..

So it was thanks to Kiran's forgetfulness that Ambedkar says that he learnt his most unforgettable lesson about untouchability. Not that he hadn't felt its insults and effects every day, in school and in the village. But that trip, when he was ten years old, was the first time he had been forced to face the full reality of caste—

—and forced to learn how caste could force a human being to deny his body's needs and feelings, even so elemental a feeling as thirst.

But all this happened more than a **hundred years ago**. Surely, such things don't happen any longer...

Really? Here's something that happened in the same **Satara** district in Maharashtra where young Bhim learnt his first lesson...

DALIT KILLED FOR DIGGING OWN WELL

HINDUSTAN TIMES
SATARA, 4 MAY 2008

Gautam (name changed) is a police constable in Satara's Man taluka, but even he could not save his brother-in-law Madhukar Ghatge.

Ghatge (48), a Dalit farmer and a father of three, retired from the Railways a few years ago and moved home from Mumbai to farm on his family's 5-acre plot here. He was murdered last week by upper-caste villagers who did not want him to dig a well on his own property.

It would have been the first well in Kulakjai village on land owned by a Dalit.

The police said Ghatge was hacked so violently that even the earth-moving machine he was using at the time was damaged.

"They left him to die. They were armed with axes and iron rods. They attacked him and left him to bleed to death," said Ghatge's 21-year-old son Tushar, a law student at a local college.

WATER WARS: DALIT WOMAN TORCHED

TIMES OF INDIA
BHOPAL, 6 JUNE 2008

An elderly Dalit woman was burnt alive allegedly by three members of an upper caste community over a dispute on fetching water from a village handpump in a Madhya Pradesh village.

Prembai, 55, suffered 80 percent burns as she was set ablaze on Tuesday, Abhishek Ranjan, sub-divisional police officer, said on Friday.

The incident took place at Harda's Kantada village where Prembai was stopped from using the village handpump by three upper caste persons, Ranjan said.

A quarrel erupted as she refused to budge, following which Hiralal, Dinesh and Rajendra allegedly set her on fire, he said, adding Prembai succumbed to burn injuries on Wednesday.

That's **crazy**, that's **sick**. The villages are stuck in a time-warp...

True; but the cities haven't evolved much either. The point is, Ambedkar never forgot how it felt to be excluded and despised. He knew he was going to have to fight deeply entrenched beliefs. He armed himself with an education—at Columbia University and at the London School of Economics. Returning to India, he launched a massive satyagraha in Mahad in 1927. He got Dalits to draw water from a tank they had been denied access to. That moment, Ambedkar believed, was as big as the convening of the National Assembly at Versailles in 1789. At Mahad, the Dalits rallied to the cry of the French Revolution: Liberty, Equality, Fraternity—ideas that also lie at the heart of Buddhist ethics. Ambedkar spoke to the gathering...

"This Chavadar Tank in Mahad is public property. The caste Hindus of Mahad are so reasonable they not only draw water from the tank themselves but freely permit people of any religion, including Muslims, to draw water from it. Nor do the caste Hindus prevent members of species considered lower than the human, such as birds and beasts, from drinking at the tank. They prevent the untouchables from drinking the water not because they suppose that the touch of the untouchables will pollute the water or that it will evaporate and vanish. The reason is they do not wish to acknowledge by such permission that castes declared inferior by sacred tradition are in fact their equals. It is not as if drinking the water of the Chavadar Tank will make us immortal. We've survived well enough all these days without drinking it. We are not going to the Chavadar Tank to merely drink its water. **We are going to the tank to assert that we too are human beings like others.** It must be clear that this meeting has been called to set up the norm of equality.

The Mahad satyagraha was a long-drawn struggle. In 1923, the Bombay Legislative Council had decreed that untouchables should be allowed to use all public waterbodies, wells, roads and schools built and run with public funds. But the local Hindus, led by the brahmins, clung viciously to their traditional privileges. Think about it. It took **four years** of preparation and peaceful protest before Ambedkar could lead 3,000 Dalits to the Chavadar Tank to drink a few sips of water! No wonder the Dalit movement calls this event the "Declaration of Independence."

How come we don't read about all this in our history books?

"This meeting is unprecedented. I feel that no parallel to it can be found in the history of India. If we seek for another meeting in the past to equal this, we shall have to go to the history of France: the revolutionary French National Assembly convened in 1789 that set new principles for the organization of society. You are all aware that our Hindu society is based on the system of castes. A rather similar system existed in the France of 1789. The French National Assembly sent the King and Queen of France to the guillotine; persecuted and massacred the aristocrats; and drove their survivors into exile. Whether this social revolution will work peacefully or violently will depend wholly on the conduct of the caste Hindus. People forget that if the rulers of France had not been treacherous to the Assembly, if the upper classes had not resisted it, it would have had no need to use violence in the work of the revolution. We say to our opponents too: Please do not oppose us. **Put away the orthodox scriptures. Follow justice.**"

WHEN THE DALITS DREW WATER FROM THE TANK, THE BRAHMINS SPREAD THE RUMOUR THAT THE UNTOUCHABLES WOULD ENTER THE VEERESHWAR TEMPLE NEXT. THIS LED TO **RIOTS.**

THE DELEGATES OF THE 'DEPRESSED CLASSES CONFERENCE' WERE ATTACKED BY ORTHODOX HINDUS. TWENTY DALITS WERE WOUNDED IN THE ATTACK; YET AMBEDKAR ASKED HIS FOLLOWERS TO OBSERVE RESTRAINT AND NOT STRIKE BACK.

"If they say their religion is our religion, then their rights and ours must be equal. But is that the case? If not, on what grounds do they say we must remain in the Hindu fold in spite of kicks and rebuffs?"

"The satyagraha movement started by Gandhi was backed by the people as it was against foreign domination. Our struggle is against the mass of caste Hindus and naturally we have little support from outside.

Beat the bastards up! They've forgotten their place. Just because the **British** made a law doesn't mean these **swine** should flout tradition and pollute our water.

DALIT WORKERS
FOUND SHELTER
IN MUSLIM HOUSES,
AND AMBEDKAR SPENT THE
NIGHT IN A POLICE STATION.
IN JUNE 1927, FIVE ORTHODOX
HINDUS WERE SENTENCED BY THE (COLONIAL)
DISTRICT MAGISTRATE TO FOUR MONTHS' RIGOROUS
IMPRISONMENT. AMBEDKAR SAID: 'HAD THE CHIEF
OFFICERS IN THE DISTRICT BEEN HINDUS, JUSTICE
WOULD HAVE BEEN DENIED. UNDER BRAHMIN
PESHWA RULE **I WOULD HAVE BEEN
TRAMPLED TO DEATH BY
AN ELEPHANT.'**

THE BRAHMINS DECIDED TO 'PURIFY' THE 'POLLUTED' CHAVADAR TANK BY POURING INTO IT 108 POTS CONTAINING A MIXTURE OF COW-DUNG AND COW-PISS, MILK, GHEE AND CURDS—I KID YOU NOT—TO A SOUNDTRACK OF VEDIC CHANTING...

ON 25 DECEMBER 1927, 10,000 PROTESTERS JOINED THE SECOND MAHAD SATYAGRAHA. AMBEDKAR AND HIS FOLLOWERS PUT A COPY OF THE *MANUSMRITI*, A BRAHMINICAL HINDU TEXT THAT UPHELD THE IDEOLOGY OF CASTE, ON A PYRE AND CEREMONIALLY SET IT ON FIRE. AMBEDKAR SAID THIS WAS LIKE INDIAN 'SWADESHI' NATIONALISTS BURNING FOREIGN CLOTH TO CHALLENGE COLONIAL EXPLOITATION.

WHAT EXACTLY DID THE *MANUSMRITI* SAY? STUFF LIKE THIS:

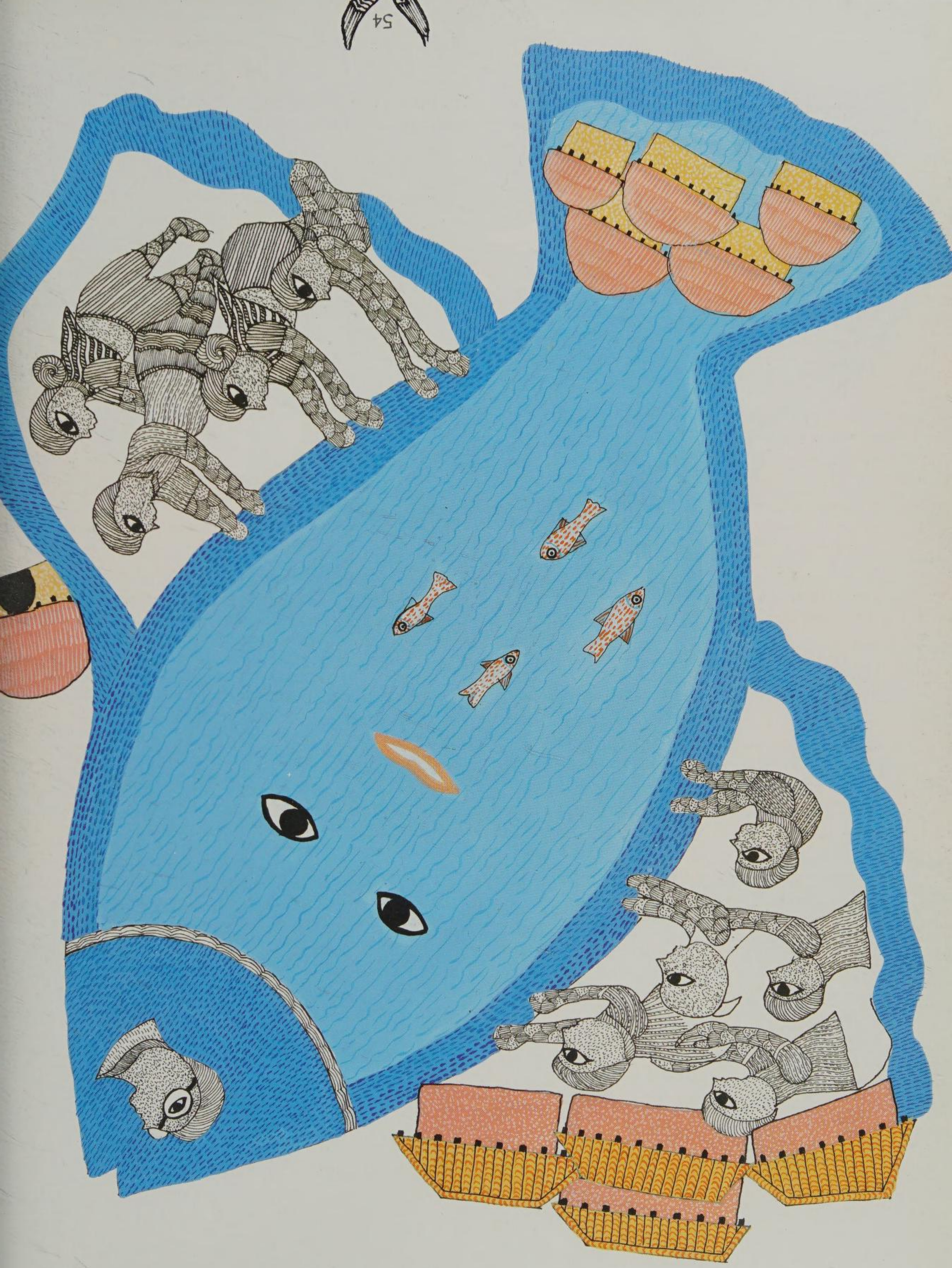
A SHUDRA [LOW-CASTE] WHO TRIES TO PLACE HIMSELF ON THE SAME SEAT WITH A MAN OF A HIGH CASTE SHALL BE BRANDED ON HIS HIP AND BE BANISHED, OR THE KING SHALL CAUSE HIS BUTTOCKS TO BE GASHED.

THE SERVICE OF BRAHMINS ALONE IS DECLARED TO BE AN EXCELLENT OCCUPATION FOR A SHUDRA.

A SHUDRA SHOULD NOT AMASS WEALTH, EVEN IF HE HAS THE ABILITY, FOR A SHUDRA WHO HAS AMASSED WEALTH ANNOYS THE BRAHMINS.

A WOMAN IS NOT FIT FOR INDEPENDENCE. HER FATHER GUARDS HER IN CHILDHOOD, HER HUSBAND GUARDS HER IN YOUTH, HER SONS IN OLD AGE.

MEN MUST KEEP THEIR WOMEN DEPENDENT DAY AND NIGHT AND KEEP UNDER THEIR OWN CONTROL THOSE WHO ARE ATTACHED TO SENSORY OBJECTS.



SHACKLING WATER

TEHELKA, 26 JAN 2008

WHEN DALITS IN CHAKWARA WON THE RIGHT TO USE THE VILLAGE POND, CASTE HINDUS TURNED IT INTO A SEWER. SALMAN USMANI REPORTS

ON 19 MARCH 1927, one of the first public battles Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar waged was the satyagraha at Mahad in Maharashtra. He had led 3,000 Dalits to assert their right to access the Chavadar Tank at Mahad. Animals were allowed to use the water of the tank but not Dalits. The caste Hindus responded to the satyagraha with violence and a social boycott. On 25 December the same year, Ambedkar burnt the *Manusmriti* – the symbol of brahmanic Hinduism that offered scriptural justification for discrimination – at Mahad.

Eighty years later, nothing seems to have changed. Chakwara village, 50 km from Jaipur, bears testimony to this. The village and life in it revolve around a large pond. The pond and its ghats have been built and maintained with state funds and contributions from the entire village, including Dalits. The village has about 700 families, of which 70 belong to Bairwas who are Dalits.

Over 20 years, the village has been in constant turmoil over the curbs Dalits face in using the pond. The caste Hindus of Chakwara would not let the Bairwas use the pond. However, buffaloes and pigs had unrestricted access.

On 14 December 2001, two Bairwas, Babulal and Radheysham, decided to defy the village 'law' and bathed in the pond. Babulal, 54, says his decision to bathe had more to do with the "frustration of being denied clean water, rather than its necessity."

Outraged by this social offence the village Jats and Brahmins surrounded Babulal's house at night and threatened a bloodbath. The next day a panchayat was called which found Babulal and Radheysham guilty of violating the village custom. The panchayat imposed a fine of Rs 50,000 on the Bairwa community and demanded a written apology. Further, the upper castes imposed a complete social boycott of the Bairwas. They could not buy ration and vegetables from the village shops; no one would employ a Bairwa or lend him money; the Bairwas were not to use the only handpump in the village.

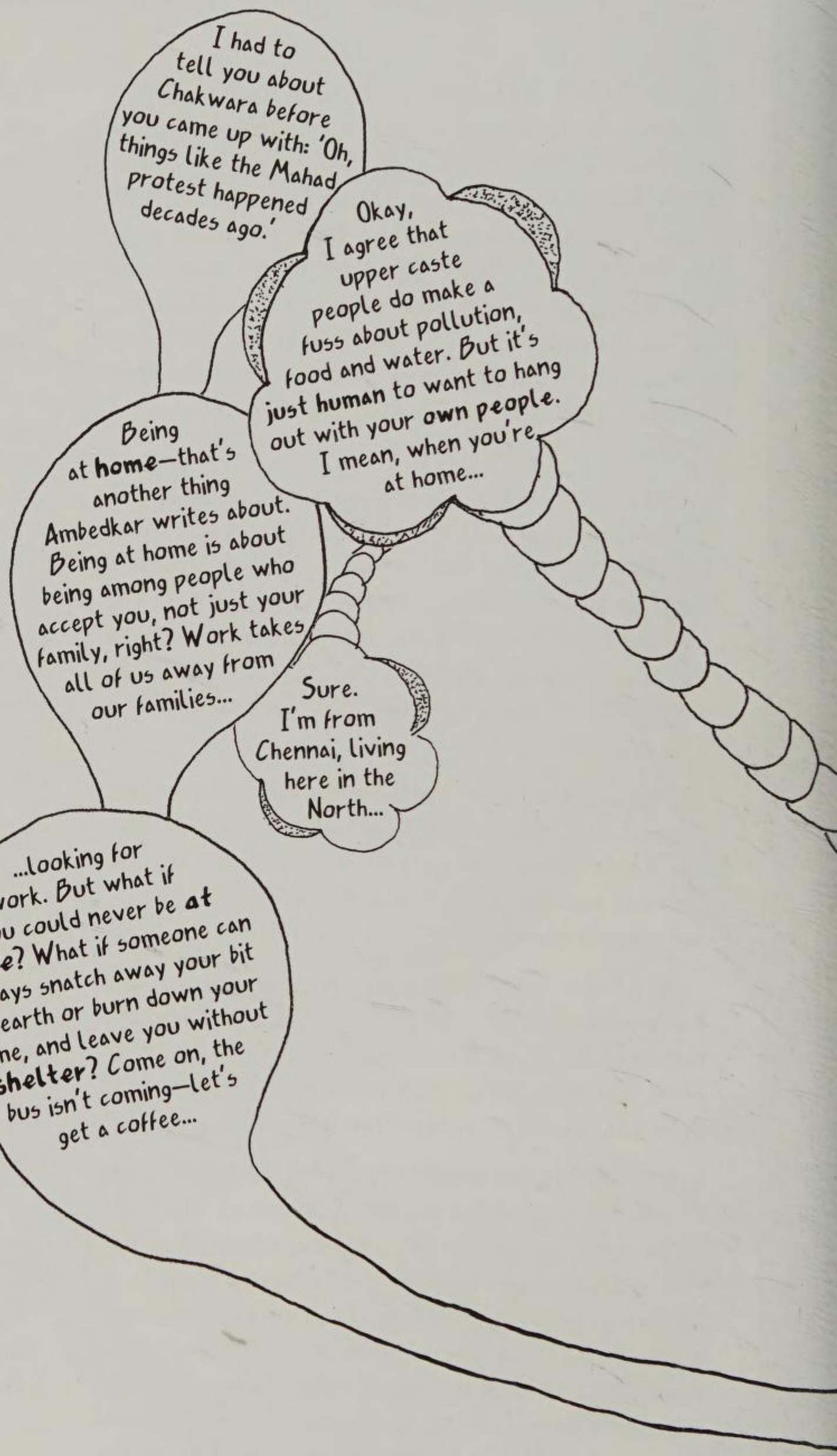
After continued threats, confrontations and abuses, Babulal finally filed a First Information Report on 22 December 2001. The Jaipur district administration and the police ignored Babulal's complaints and tried to convince the Dalits not to use the pond, eventually making some of them sign a compromise agreement. However, the boycott, the threats and the abuse continued for months, with the administration occasionally stepping in only to side with the upper castes.

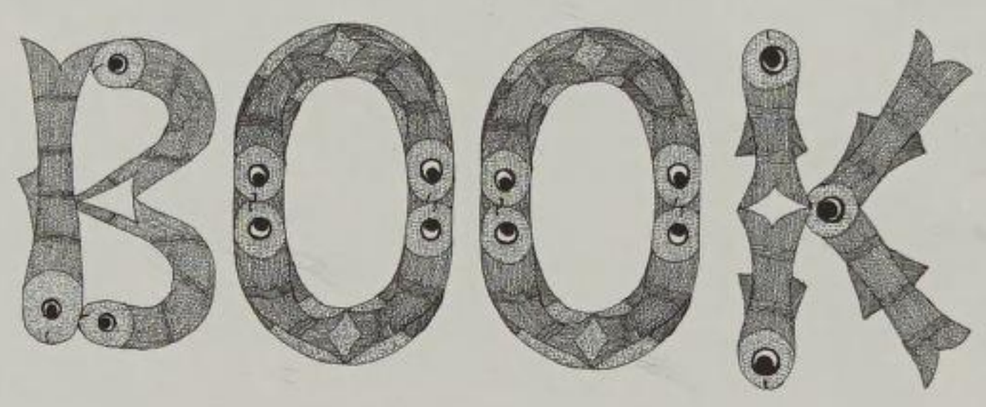
In September 2002, several human rights organizations collaborated with the Bairwas to organize a rally in yet another effort to assert their rights. The upper castes decided to physically confront the rally. They attacked the rally with stones and sticks. The situation worsened and the police responded with teargas and finally had to open fire. Around 50 people were injured, most of whom were policemen. The rally and the confrontation temporarily and unintentionally put the administration and the upper caste men at loggerheads. Complaints were made and pursued in the collector's office.

IT SEEMED LIKE a victory for the Bairwas, who started to use the pond regularly, but their triumph was short-lived. Soon after the clash, the upper castes withdrew from the pond. They stopped using it, saying it had become impure. The tension, anger and the boycott has continued since then. However, after the heightened interest of human rights organizations, NGOs, administration, the national and international media, Chakwara and its Dalits have fallen off the mindscapes again.

Today, the caste Hindus have started to shit and dump garbage in the pond. Recently, some men dug up the village sewer and directed it to the pond water. Every effort has been made to pollute the pond – literally and symbolically – for now it is only the Dalit Bairwas who use it.

In urban India, Dalits are forced to clean sewers and drains immersing themselves in putrid muck. In Chakwara, a pond that was once considered sacred is now no better than a large sewage tank. The Dalits have, after decades, won the right to use it. But they continue to lose their dignity, for the caste Hindus know how to "shackle the rushing form of water".


I had to tell you about Chakwara before you came up with: 'Oh, things like the Mahad protest happened decades ago.'
Okay, I agree that upper caste people do make a fuss about pollution, food and water. But it's just human to want to hang out with your own people. I mean, when you're at home...
Being at home—that's another thing Ambedkar writes about. Being at home is about being among people who accept you, not just your family, right? Work takes all of us away from our families...
Sure. I'm from Chennai, living here in the North...
...looking for work. But what if you could never be at home? What if someone can always snatch away your bit of earth or burn down your home, and leave you without shelter? Come on, the bus isn't coming—let's get a coffee...


BOOK

SHELTER

1918. AMBEDKAR BOARDS A TRAIN IN BOMBAY, HEADING TO BARODA.

You must have gone to a good college!

I was at Columbia University, America. Professor Dewey was one of my teachers.

America! Your father must be a rich man!

No, he was not. His Highness—Sayaji Rao, the Maharaja of Baroda—sponsored my education.

You must be a very bright boy! I wish my son could learn from you—he's a disgrace to our brahmin caste!

My god, spending four years in the States and nearly a year in England has turned me into a foreigner! Being away has nearly **wiped my untouchability** out of my mind! I'd better be careful—an untouchable, wherever he goes in India, is a problem to himself and to others.

That was **close**... I'm back in India and must mind what I say.

I'm not brahm—

What was that?

Nothing.

And will the Raja employ you now?

Yes. I am bound to serve the Baroda State. I'm to be a probationer in the Accountant General's office.

So I suppose the Raja will put you up?

No—I have to find a place to stay.

Where will I go? Who will take me in?

Ah—you'll stay with friends.

No—not with friends.

An untouchable has no friends among other castes. If I claim a friendship, and am rejected, it will be embarrassing and painful on both sides.

Then make sure you stay at a good Hindu hotel.

To stay in a Hindu hotel, I'll have to pretend to be upper caste—and if I get caught, I'll get beaten up, maybe killed.

"In Columbia University, I
experienced social equality
the first time. The best frien
I've had in my life were so
of my classmates at Colum
and my great professors, Jo
Dewey, James Shotwell, Ed
Seligman and James Harve
Robinson."—Ambedkar in
Columbia Alumni News,
Dec. 1930.

I wish we'd reach Baroda soon so I can be rid of this betel-chewing brahmin's questions. This train is crawling along...

Here we are. This is Baroda station—go safely. The tongawallas are over there— they'll recommend a decent hotel.

BARODA
बरोड़ा

Can you tell me where in the camp I can stay a few weeks?

I don't know—well, there's a Parsi inn that takes paying guests.

What a relief—Parsis are Zoroastrians and don't practice untouchability.

This is an old inn and I've rooms only on the first floor. And they are not too clean. Don't say later I did not warn you...

It doesn't really matter. I'll take it.

IN AMBEDKAR'S ROOM...

You aren't wearing a sadra and kasti*—are you a Parsi?

I, er... I'm— I'm a Hindu.

A **Hindu!** This hotel is run by Parsis, and only for other Parsis. You'll have to **leave.** Right now.

How can you stay? I have to put your **name** down in my register.

I may be a Hindu, but I have no objection to staying here, if you have no objection to me.

Well... there have been no customers for a while... all right, you pay a rupee and a half per day for board and lodging, and sign here with a Parsi name. I'll serve tea and food twice a day, but don't expect me to stop and chat.

I could write a Parsi name in the register. You will lose nothing—you will earn something if I stay here.

*The sadra is a loose shirt with a small pocket in front, made of thin cotton; the kasti is a braided thread that is tied around the sadra.

It's going to be lonely in here... The caretaker certainly wants as little to do with me as possible. Oh well, I'll try not to come back from work until it is really late.

It's been just a week but it **feels** like forever. In the office, they hurl files at me, fearing my touch. I **have** little work there but **hate coming** back to my depressing room in this decrepit inn. I'm like an ox in the oil-press, walking in circles and going nowhere...

It's so dark—the light from the lamp doesn't pierce it at all. Oh well! I can still read in this dungeon. And any shelter is better than no shelter at all.

Dear Dr Ambedkar, I received your petition asking me to help you find permanent accommodation in one of Baroda's State Bungalows. I regret to say that since the Prime Minister has not made this a priority, I can do nothing—why don't you ask...

Damn. That's the **fifth** officer who can do nothing to help me find a place to stay.

Let's see what **this** letter has to say...

It's an **omen**—even the bats are telling me I can't pretend to be a Parsi much longer. I wonder what my punishment will be...

FOUR DAYS LATER...

Ah, it's 10 o'clock. Time for me to leave for work... I can hear people walking up... maybe tourists. So I am to have **company?**

A GROUP OF PARSIS ARMED WITH STICKS MARCH UP...

Hey, you! Who are you?

Why did you come **here?**

How dare you take a **Parsi** name?

You **filthy** scoundrel! You have **polluted** the Parsi inn!

What do I say? I have committed fraud, and the fraud has been discovered. If I lie now, I will be killed. **My shelter or my life?** Which do I fight for?

Well at least you seem ashamed... You'd better start packing, if you value your life.

Listen, you dirty Hindu **dog**, if we find you in this room this evening, your family won't even find any of your remains to weep over.

I **implore** you—let me stay for a week at least. I've applied to the Minister for a house.

We'll check the place at 6 o'clock sharp.

Curse them, and curse the Prime Minister and his officers for leaving me here in a strange place without shelter...even this wretched prison cell was precious, it was a home.

Now what? How can finding a place to stay become such a big problem? Surely I can find something—make some temporary move, until I get official quarters!

But what move? I know no untouchable families in Baroda. My Hindu and Christian friends may be able to help...

Jai, is there any way I could stay with you for a few days, until they find a State bungalow for me?

Bhimrao, you know you are a dear personal friend of mine. I am sad and angry that these Parsis treated you so badly. You are welcome to stay with me. I just want to say one thing, though—if you come to my home my servants will go.

Yes, yes, I understand. I won't subject you to this inconvenience.

VADODARA,* NAMED FOR THE KINDLY BANYAN TREE,
IN ALL YOUR CROWDED STREETS THERE IS NO PLACE FOR ME.

NO ROOF, NOWHERE TO REST, NO FRIEND WITH WHOM I MIGHT
REHEARSE THE EVENTS OF THE DAY, SPEND AN HOUR OR A NIGHT.

*Vadodara, from vadpatra for banyan, is the original name of Baroda.

I really do sympathize—it's shocking, the way the Parsis turned you out. I have a small problem, though—I'll have to check with my **wife**. You see, I'm liberal in my thinking, but she—you know how women are, they just cannot be weaned from orthodoxy.

He's being diplomatic...what did I expect? He and his wife were brahmins before they converted.

I have to leave the hotel. There's nowhere else to go... I'm an educated and employed man, but not all my education and money will buy me a shelter for the night.

Thank you, Peter. I mustn't put her out. But I must still resolve the question of where to go tonight...

AMBEDKAR DECIDES TO WAIT IT OUT IN THE **KAMATHI BAUG** PUBLIC GARDEN.

There's only one thing to do. I must return to Bombay tonight. The train to Bombay leaves at 9 p.m. Where do I spend five hours? Back to the hotel? They might be lying in wait for me. Try another friend? I do not like to be **pitied**...

I've had to give up on my obligation to the Maharaja after just 11 days. All because a person who is an untouchable to a Hindu is an untouchable to a Parsi, and also to a Christian.

"I WONDER WHAT MY PARENTS WOULD HAVE THOUGHT OF ALL THIS. I CAME HERE WITH SUCH HIGH HOPES—I WAS GOING TO PROVE SO MUCH TO THE WORLD, I TURNED DOWN MANY WELL-PAID JOBS TO REPAY MY DEBT TO THE MAHARAJA... "

A while ago you said untouchability exists only in the villages. Ambedkar, because of his caste, was denied shelter in a city like Baroda though he bore all the marks of education and status.

In **Delhi**, recently, three students training for the civil service exams were **beaten up** and **evicted** after they were discovered to be dalit.

If the places you call **home** are as bad as this, you can imagine what **travelling** to **new places** might be like...

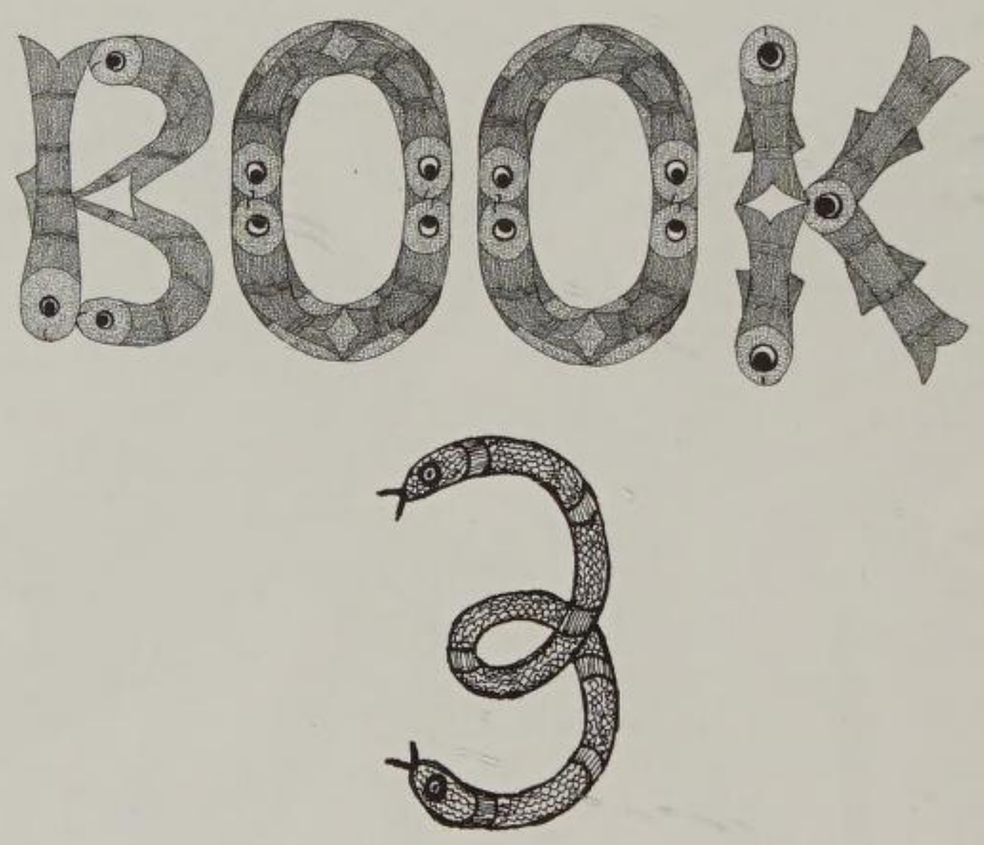
DALIT SIBLINGS THRASHED BY LANDLORD

THE HINDU
NEW DELHI, 5 May 2008

Three Dalit siblings living as tenants in Mukherjee Nagar here were allegedly beaten up and abused by their landlord's family apparently after they learnt of their Scheduled Caste status. Two sisters and a brother living on the third floor of 165 Mukherjee Nagar claimed that they were beaten up and punched by their landlord Om Prakash Grover, his wife, their son and daughter-in-law on Saturday after one of the sisters, Kanaklata, went downstairs to fill water.

"They did not let her fill water and instead started beating her with a slipper. My brother Chandra Bhushan who tried to intervene was also beaten up. On hearing the commotion, I rushed downstairs. They tried to tear my clothes and one of the sons of our landlord punched me. They hurled abuses at us. A number of people had gathered outside the house but no one came forward to help us," claimed Manorama, the other sister.

When the victims called their brother Vijay Bahadur, who stays nearby in a separate accommodation, and a friend, they too were allegedly thrashed by Mr Grover and his family.


BOOK

TRAVEL

AURANGABAD, **1934**. AMBEDKAR, 43, IS ON A BUS WITH A GROUP OF COLLEAGUES.

That was quite a story, Babasaheb, about the Parsi hotel. I've always been surprised by how ideas about **pollution** never change, even though people change their **religion**. Parsis, Christians—they all **cling** to the caste system.

Not just Parsis, but Muslims too, though their religion, again, teaches the **equality** of men in the eyes of God.

Well, this is my **first ever** sight-seeing trip and I **love** the travel.

But brother, we seem to bring out the **worst** in people when we travel.

I think we were right to travel without announcing to everyone that we are a busload of 30-odd political workers of mahar and other untouchable castes.

Yes—that would have called too much attention to us. We have told the people at Daulatabad that we're coming, by the way. They'll guide us....

I really want to see the **Buddhist caves at Verul** more than anything else. But what's to see in **Daulatabad?**

"WELL, IT'S PART OF THE NIZAM'S TERRITORY NOW. IT WAS ONCE RULED BY A HINDU KING. THE FORT IS OF GREAT HISTORICAL INTEREST... LET'S TAKE A BREAK AND EAT."

I like our driver—he is very **cautious**. Did I tell you about the time I visited Nasik during my Bombay trip in 1929?

No, tell us...

I was waiting at the **Chalisgaon** station for a train to a village on the Dhulia line.

Was that when you were going to look into that social **boycott** by caste Hindus of the untouchables in **Dhulia**?

Yes... that was when it happened.

"THE UNTOUCHABLES OF CHALISGAON WERE KEEN THAT I STAY THE NIGHT WITH THEM. I AGREED TO DO THIS ON MY RETURN FROM DHULIA. THEY MET ME AT THE STATION WHEN I CAME BACK."

It will be an honour to have you stay with us, Babasaheb. The maharwada—our neighbourhood—is just a couple of miles away.

AFTER 15 MINUTES...

Can we take one of these tongas now?

Why are we waiting so long? I don't mind walking... shall we go now?

Er... we have to wait, Babasaheb.

No, no, Babasaheb. Please bear with us.

AN HOUR LATER...

We'll take the **shortcut** across the fields and get home before Babasaheb's cart makes it to Chalisgaon...

Brother Namdeo, drive carefully...

Careful, my friend! Didn't you see the car coming? We almost collided with it...

Hey! Watch it, tongawalla! Looks like you have a respectable customer... Else, I'd have asked you to pull over.

A very close shave... how can the driver be this **clumsy**?

"WE SOMEHOW CAME TO THE CULVERT ON THE RIVER WHICH WAS AT RIGHT ANGLES TO THE ROAD WE WERE COMING BY... THERE WERE NO SIDE-WALLS AS THERE ARE ON A BRIDGE. A SHARP TURN HAD TO BE TAKEN...

AAAAAH!

"I WAS UNCONSCIOUS FOR A LONG TIME. THOSE WHO CAME TO GET ME HAD ALREADY REACHED THE MAHARWADA—THEY RUSHED OUT, AND TOOK ME TO ONE OF THE HOMES."

I still don't **understand** it—the tonga must be going up and down everyday—how come the driver didn't know how to cross the culvert?

We are mahars... Babasaheb, the tongawallas wouldn't drive you here. How could we insult you by making you **walk**? So my brother-in-law borrowed the tonga from its owner, and was trying to bring you home.

And he'd never **driven** a tonga before?

No, poor boy. Hai-hai! He has broken his arm and three ribs...

Will you drink a glass of milk?

So, for the sake of my **dignity**, you risked my neck!

To tell you the truth, Namdeo took the reins in his hand, thinking there was nothing in it. But he got so nervous that he dropped the reins and that **stupid** horse misbehaved.

Heh-heh-heh! They make fools of themselves and blame me!

So I learnt that a Hindu tongawalla, a **menial** in the eyes of caste Hindus, can look upon himself as **superior** to all untouchables.

On the 5th of this month a child was born to me. On the 7th, she fell ill...Her vitality seemed to ebb away and her chest became inflamed. Her breathing became difficult. I went to call a doctor—but he said he would not go to the house of a Harijan. Nor was he prepared to examine the child. Then I went to the Nagarseth and pleaded for help. The Nagarseth stood surety to the doctor for my paying his fee. Then the doctor came but on condition that he would examine them only outside the Harijan colony. I took my wife out of the colony along with the new-born child. Then the doctor gave his thermometer to a Muslim, who gave it to me and I gave it to my wife and then returned it by the same process...

It was about 8 o'clock in the evening and the doctor on looking at the thermometer said the patient was suffering from pneumonia. Then the doctor went away and sent the medicine... The doctor refused to see her later, though I gave the two-rupee fee. The lamp of my life has died out. She passed away at about 2 o'clock this afternoon.

Even a barrister-at-law. Even a scholar and a Ph.D. from one of the best universities in the world.

Yes. But I was lucky that a good doctor treated me promptly. Did you read last month's *Young India*?*

*A journal edited by Mohandas Gandhi, 12 Dec 1929.

Listen—it's written by a village schoolteacher whose wife and child died because the doctor would not **touch** them to examine them. I shudder to think that my leg may not have healed...

A truly **terrible** story, but a common one among our people. Now, we'd better get moving—back to the bus.

THROWN OUT OF HOSPITAL, TWO DALIT WOMEN DIE

TIMES NEWS NETWORK
2 Nov 2007

KANPUR: If it was expected that atrocities against Dalits would become a thing of the past after their icon Mayawati came to power with a Bahujan Samaj Party majority in Uttar Pradesh, it was misplaced because in a shocking incident, two Dalit women died after being thrown out of a government hospital here on Thursday.

The gruesome assault took place because of the inability of the two women to bribe government health officials with a paltry Rs 1,000 each barely two hours after they gave birth to two babies. Devorati (25), who gave birth to a boy around 5 pm, was the first to die. Her husband Dilip had admitted her to the hospital after bribing an official with Rs 500. As per government norms, admission to hospitals is free and women coming for delivery should get Rs 1,400 as an allowance. On the contrary, Dilip was asked to pay an additional Rs 1,000.

Within hours, Kamla, wife of Ramprakash of Ambarpur village, too was thrown out of the hospital just after she gave birth to a girl child when her family members refused to pay a bribe of Rs 500 and instead demanded Rs 1,400 under the Janani-Suraksha Yojna meant for pregnant women in the Below Poverty Line category.

Babasaheb, you **must** have tea and refreshments with us first...

Then we'll send some boys to show you the way to the fort.

My friends, thank you for your hospitality. We want tea very badly, but we really want to see the fort by daylight. If we stop now, we won't get to it before dark. Will you wait for us to come back?

Wow! The fort looks majestic... **Look**—a tank of fresh water. Let's wash first—I feel **parched** and dusty. No one seems to be around...

It is the holy month of **Ramzan**, and most of the people here are Muslims.

Dheds! Untouchables! They've polluted the tank!

Sir, how do we get permission to go into the fort?

Sahibs, we are outsiders. We don't know your local customs

It was really **our mistake** because we acted without inquiry.

Sahib, we didn't know they would drink the water. We only just caught up with them—

What? Who are you?

The untouchables have become **arrogant!**

The **dheds** have forgotten that their religion teaches them—to remain low and degraded!

Then the people you are staying with are the ones to blame!

The dheds must be taught a **lesson!**

There they are—they are from the **untouchable village!**

You **bastards!** Why didn't you tell these strangers that this tank could not be used by untouchables?

You **sons of bitches!**

Hey, watch your mouth!

Restrain yourself, boy! We don't want a **riot** and dead bodies!

Yes, you restrain yourself, **dirty scavengers!** Everyone must conform to his religion! Untouchables must **not** take water from a public tank!

Look, I am a patient man, but I will not tolerate your gratuitous insults. Young man, is this what your religion teaches? Would you prevent an untouchable from taking water from this tank if he became a Mohammedan? Just tell us if we can we get into the fort or not. If we can't we don't want to stop. Here, take this piece of paper that tells you who I am. Show it to the man in charge...

You can go in. But you can't **touch** water anywhere in the fort. This sepoy—Rahman—will go with you to see that you obey the order.

A lot of people say we exaggerate the allegations of Hindu injustice, oppression and tyranny. The doctor who treated the untouchable woman, for instance, felt no qualms of conscience in setting aside the code of conduct which is binding on his profession. The Hindu would prefer to be inhuman rather than touch an untouchable. In Baroda I found that a person who is an untouchable to a Hindu is also untouchable to a Parsi. And in Daulatabad I discovered that a person who is an untouchable to a Hindu is also an untouchable to a Mohammedan.

You know, if we take equality and social justice at all seriously in this country today, it's thanks to **Ambedkar**.

You're exaggerating, right? Next you'll be saying Ambedkar was more serious about equality than **Gandhi!**

I'd say that without hesitation. Ambedkar campaigned for a just society all his life, from the time he launched an anticaste newspaper in 1920, through the years he spent studying at the London School of Economics and qualifying at Gray's Inn to be a lawyer, through the years he spent practising law at the Bombay High Court. He wanted the untouchable castes to be politicized, to fight for their rights, not to have to rely on the kindness and good intentions of upper-caste Hindus. He launched organizations to raise political awareness and to build schools and libraries for the most marginalized castes. Gandhi had different priorities—he was more concerned with India's freedom from British rule than with the transformation of Hindu society.

With justice on our side I do not see how we can lose our battle. The battle to me is a matter of joy. The battle is in the fullest sense spiritual. There is nothing material or social in it. For ours is a battle not for wealth or for power. It is a battle for freedom. It is a battle for the **reclamation of human personality.**

My final words of advice to you are **EDUCATE, ORGANIZE** and **AGITATE;** have faith in yourself...

When Ambedkar was on the point of convincing the British government that the untouchable people should have separate electorates, Gandhi actually stepped in to derail the process.

September 1931

To the Minorities Committee of the Indian Round Table Conference

The following are the terms and conditions on which the Depressed Classes will consent to place themselves under a majority rule in a self-governing India.

1. EQUAL CITIZENSHIP
2. FREE ENJOYMENT OF EQUAL RIGHTS
3. PROTECTION AGAINST DISCRIMINATION
4. ADEQUATE REPRESENTATION IN LEGISLATURES
5. ADEQUATE REPRESENTATION IN THE SERVICES
6. ADEQUATE REPRESENTATION IN CABINET
7. REDRESS AGAINST PREJUDICIAL ACTION

I have not the slightest doubt that if the Untouchables of India were given the chance of electing their representatives to this Conference, I would find a place here. I say therefore that **I fully represent the claims of my community**. Let no man be under any mistaken impression as regards that.

So Gandhi, with his fast, twisted the government's arm as well as Ambedkar's, and the government shelved the idea of independent electorates. Ambedkar said: 'The Congress sucked the juice out and threw the rind in the face of the untouchables.'

Hmm... Independent electorates would be a bit like **reservation** in jobs, right? I'm with Gandhi on this one.

I'm sure you are. Just as I'm sure that if anyone but Ambedkar had drafted free India's national **Constitution**, it would have been a very different document.

That's the one thing they taught me about Ambedkar in school—that he was the architect of the Constitution. Wasn't he Chair of the—uh—the Something Committee?

—the Drafting Committee. The draft Constitution that the Constituent Assembly adopted in 1949 was mostly his doing.

WE, THE PEOPLE OF INDIA, having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a SOVEREIGN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC and to secure to all its citizens:
JUSTICE, social, economic and political;
LIBERTY of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship;
EQUALITY of status and of opportunity;
and to promote among them all FRATERNITY assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity of the Nation;
IN OUR CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY this twenty-sixth day of November, 1949, do HEREBY ADOPT, ENACT AND GIVE TO OURSELVES THIS CONSTITUTION.

I claim myself in my own person to represent the vast mass of the Untouchables. I claim that I would get, if there was a referendum of the untouchables, their vote, and that **I would top the poll!**

March 1932

To Sir Samuel Hoare,
Secretary of State for India

Dear Sir Samuel,

The Untouchables are not well organized. There is very little political consciousness among them and they are so horribly treated that I want to save them against themselves. I hold that a separate electorate is harmful for the Depressed Classes and for Hinduism. I therefore respectfully inform His Majesty's Government that in the event of their decision creating a separate electorate for the Depressed Classes, I must fast unto death...

I remain, your faithful friend,
M.K. Gandhi

1. The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth.

2. No citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth be subject to any disability, liability, restriction or condition with regard to—

a) access to shops, public restaurants, hotels and places of public entertainment; or

b) the use of wells, tanks, bathing ghats, roads and places of public resort maintained wholly or partly out of State funds or dedicated to the use of the general public.

3. Nothing in this article shall prevent the State from making any special provision for women and children.

Did you know Ambedkar was **India's first Law Minister**? His draft of the **Hindu Code Bill** tried to make Hindu personal law more equitable, especially for women. The Bill sanctioned **divorce**, for instance, and expanded the **property rights of widows and girl children**. The Constituent Assembly debated it for months, and ended up rejecting not only Ambedkar's draft but also a second, watered-down one. He was too far ahead of his time. He was so outraged he **resigned** from Nehru's cabinet.

That must have been quite a statement.

BUDDHISM IS BASED ON REASON. THERE IS AN ELEMENT OF FLEXIBILITY IN IT NOT FOUND IN OTHER RELIGIONS.

IT WAS NOT MY FAULT I WAS BORN AN UNTOUCHABLE. BUT I AM DETERMINED I WILL NOT DIE A HINDU.

WHAT IS THE VILLAGE BUT A SINK OF LOCALISM, A DEN OF IGNORANCE, NARROW-MINDEDNESS AND COMMUNALISM. I AM GLAD THE CONSTITUTION HAS DISCARDED THE VILLAGE AND ADOPTED THE INDIVIDUAL AS ITS UNIT.

TURN IN ANY DIRECTION YOU LIKE, CASTE IS THE MONSTER THAT CROSSES YOUR PATH.

INDIAN SOCIETY IS A GRADATION OF CASTES FORMING AN ASCENDING SCALE OF REVERENCE AND A DESCENDING SCALE OF CONTEMPT.

IT'S A SOCIAL TYRANNY.

HOW CAN A PEOPLE DIVIDED INTO THOUSANDS OF CASTES BE A NATION?

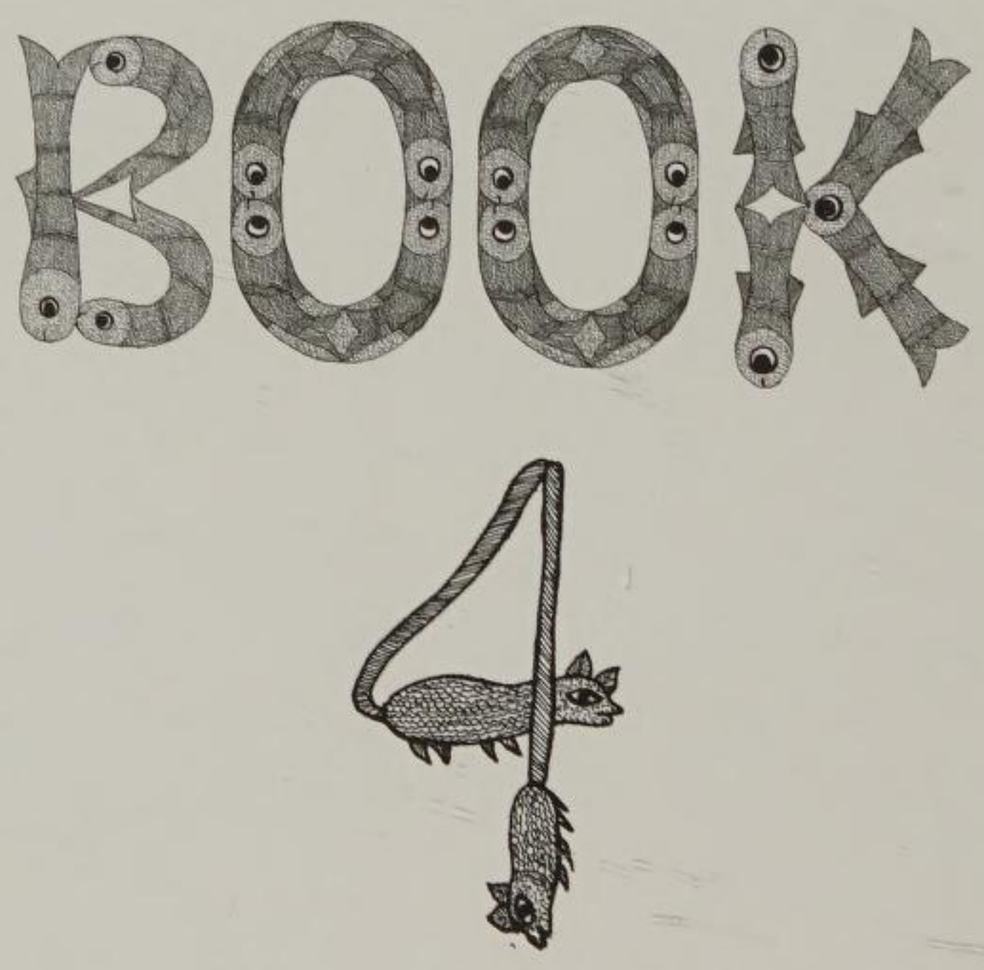
IN INDIA IS ONLY A TOP-DRESSING ON AN INDIAN SOIL WHICH IS ESSENTIALLY UNDEMOCRATIC.

He was making statements to the very end of his life. He had been thinking for many years of publicly rejecting Hinduism. He wrote a dense and closely argued text, *The Buddha and his Dhamma*, a mnemonic opus. In October 1956, a few months before he died, he publicly embraced Buddhism, and more than half a million followers converted with him. This is known as the largest conversion in human history.

Can't help respecting the man, though I don't agree with him—or with you. I'm starting to see why he is such an icon for dalits today. Have you finished your coffee?

I have. And hey, I can see the **bus** coming. Good luck with your job-hunt.

It's back to the grind for me... bye, now. Or, like they say— **Jai Bhim!**


BOOK

Hello Anand-ji. We are at it. Just a few more pages to be done. You may come this weekend. It'll be ready.

THE ART OF BHIMAYANA

I am **Durga**. I was born in **Barbaspur** village in eastern Madhya Pradesh. Near our village is the Dhooti jungle, so called because it is structured like a bamboo fish basket. Here, I am 10 years old, listening to the bedtime stories my grandma tells me.

Every morning, I'd head to the Tudar river, wash, bathe and fetch water. I would then sweep the yard and make digna with the white chuhi matti (earth). I would pat cow dung into cakes. Then off to the Tudar again to fetch more water, catch some fish with nets made of coarse cloth and collect firewood from the Dhooti.

I am **Subhash**. When Durga and I got married, we moved to my village, **Sanpuri**. Here, we made dignas together on the walls of our home on festive occasions. It is these digna patterns that we have used to arrive at panels for this graphic book.

In villages, we would collect various kinds of coloured matti, available seasonally, to make dignas. The white chuhi matti is available only in January and February in the Barenda jungle. Ramraj, yellow, is found on the Amarkantak hill—where the Narmada originates—just before the annual Goddess Narmada festival. After which it turns red. In Phagun (February–March), we collect the black kaali matti in Ghar Ka Matta. Only lal matti (red) is available perennially in Dhooti jungle.

We now do our paintings on paper and canvas using fabric and acrylic colours. For the fine black and white lines, we use Rotring pens. However, our aesthetic draws on our village experience...

For example, to fill spaces we use patterns like dhan (grain, page 60), kodo (mustard, Ambedkar's face on the cover), moa grass (34) etc. The borders that frame an image are inspired by fences in a field—like on this page.

After some years, with the blessings of my in-laws, we decided to move to the state capital, Bhopal, where our guru Jangarh Singh Shyam had established the modern Pardhan Gond art movement.

In Bhopal, initially I worked various odd jobs, including in a screen printing unit where I became familiar with the basics of print technology. Durga divided her time between household work and doing paintings. Jangarh, my brother-in-law, encouraged her.

Jangarh-jija and his wife Nankusia invited many talented artists like us to the city, gave us shelter, and helped us explore the world of contemporary art. They are the deep roots of a large tree. Subhash and I are one of the branches on that tree. We owe everything to them.

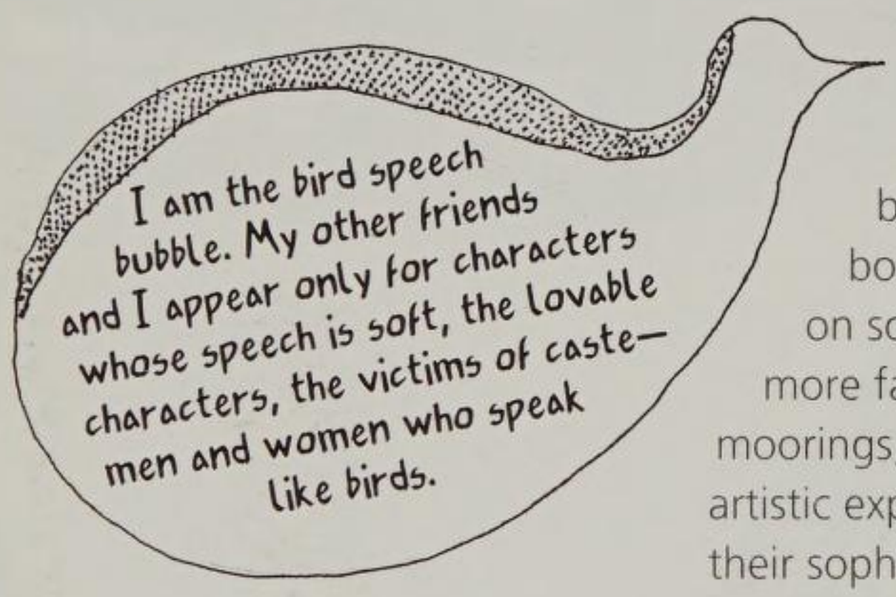
When Anand approached me for the Ambedkar book, I suggested Subhash and I would work together on this. He agreed and we made several trips to Delhi and he visited us in Bhopal several times.

During one of our visits to Navayana, Anand was not in the office and the landlady abused us and wouldn't let us go in. She said we looked like yokels. That hurt us. Anand told her that I was an artist who had published many books and had even been to Frankfurt, but none of this made any difference to her. We were reminded of Ambedkar's plight in Baroda and could understand his hurt.

A Digna for Bhim

During one of the first sessions I had with Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam, sometime in June 2008, they browsed the books of the masters of the graphic book genre, North American, Franco-Belgian and Japanese—Will Eisner, Art Spiegelman, Joe Sacco, Shaun Tan and Osamu Tezuka. They also looked at Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* and the work of some Indian graphic novelists. The Vyams counterposed their own philosophy of art to the visual imagery in these graphic texts (which they described as being by 'fine art school' types): 'We'd like to state one thing very clearly at the outset. We shall not force our characters into boxes. It stifles them. We prefer to mount our work in open spaces. Our art is *khulla* (open) where there's space for all to breathe.' This was a defining moment—we were on to something that would defy the conventional grammar of graphic books. Tiresome photorealism was out of the question. Nor would the Vyams offer cinematic establishment shots, close-ups or extreme close-ups (of tense hands, surprised eyes, furrowed brow), mid-shot, perspective, light and shadow, three dimensionality, aerial views, low angles etc that have come to constitute the mise-en-scène of graphic books. The same character might not appear similar through the book. Durgabai had worked on several picture books, especially for children, but the Vyams or other Gond artists had never explored sequential art. Even when they 'illustrated' children's books, they were known for their full-page renditions.

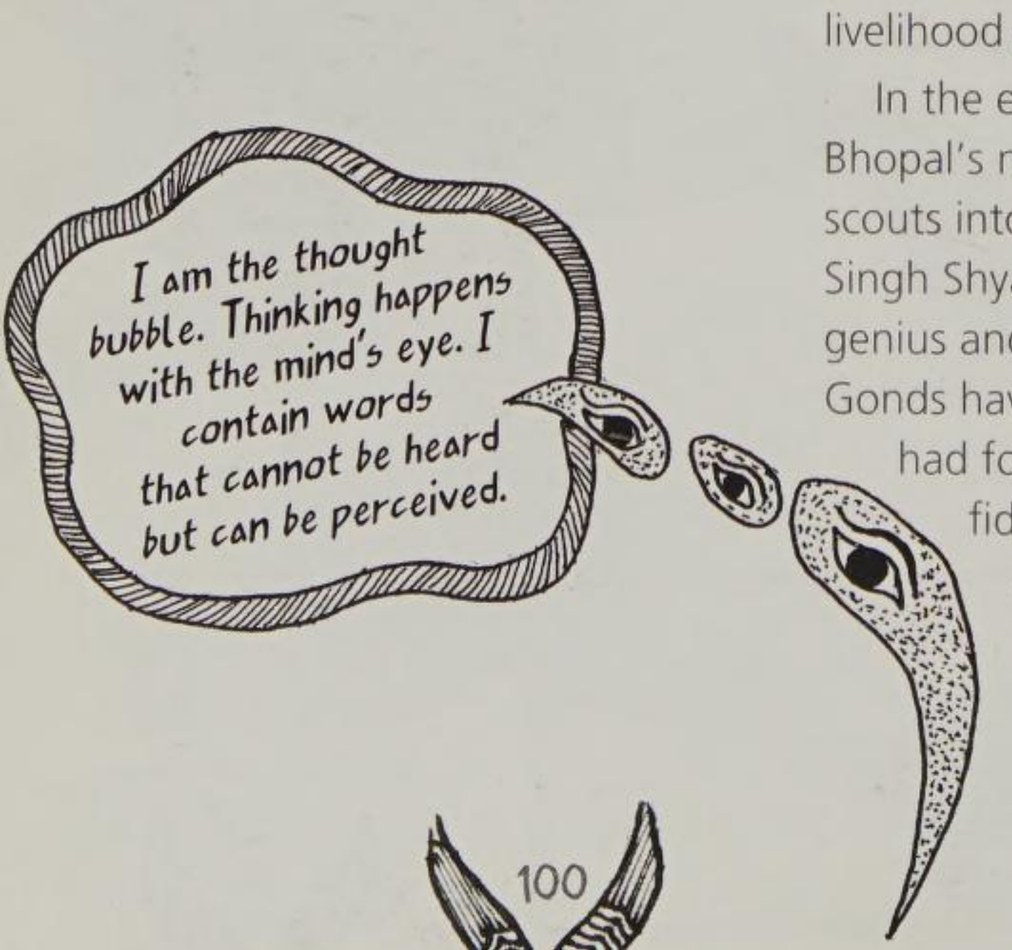
In fact, since the mid-1990s, once the Pardhan Gond art movement was established by Jangarh Singh Shyam who blazed a trail from his eastern Madhya Pradesh village of Patangarh to Bharat Bhavan in Bhopal, the Pompidou in Paris and the Mithila Museum (of all places) in Niigata, rural Japan, some publishers had begun to extensively use Gond art to illustrate children's books. At Navayana, I had commissioned Durgabai Vyam for a nonfiction book for children in 2007. Durga and Subhash had said then: 'Get us to work on something we have never done before, and on a large scale.' As I became more familiar with the history of the Pardhan Gond art form and its contemporary moorings, I began to comprehend the range, complexity and depth of this genre of artistic expression. I needed to present the Vyams with a challenge that did justice to their sophisticated visual language.


I am the bird speech bubble. My other friends and I appear only for characters whose speech is soft, the lovable characters, the victims of caste—men and women who speak like birds.

Jangarh's Legacy

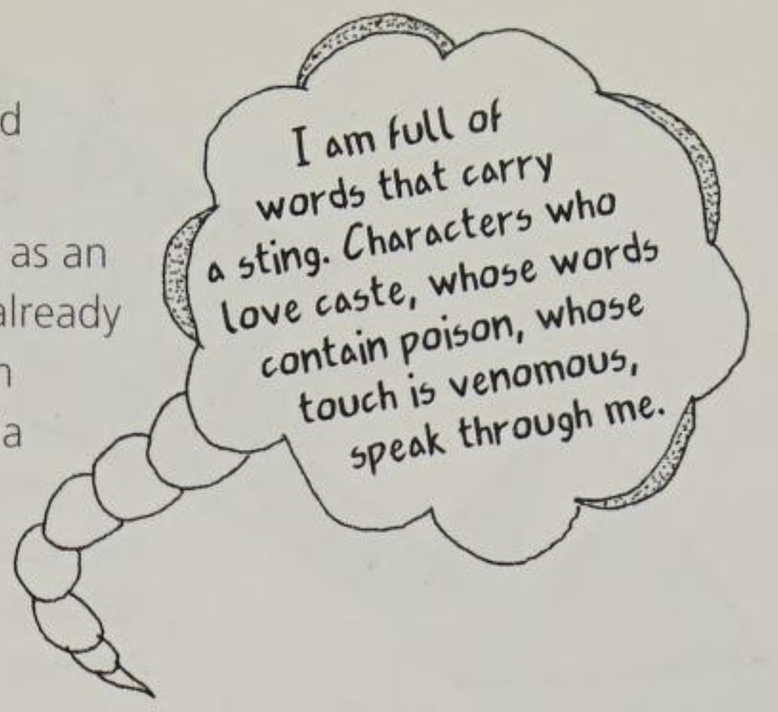
Before we go further, a brief overview of the origins of Pardhan Gond art is necessary for those who are experiencing their approach for the first time here. Pardhan Gonds, a clan belonging to the larger Gond tribal community in central India, serve as the traditional keepers of their people's cultural heritage and lineages—remembering family genealogies, and transmitting legends, sacred myths and oral histories through songs and storytelling. Pardhan Gond bards are still patronized by the larger Gond community, yet – with customary tribal patronage dwindling over the past century – their traditional livelihood and performance narratives have been made increasingly obsolete.

In the early-1980s, artist Jagdish Swaminathan (1928–1994) – then director of Bhopal's newly founded Charles Correa-designed Bharat Bhavan cultural centre – sent scouts into rural Madhya Pradesh, where one of them spotted the talent of Jangarh Singh Shyam in remote Patangarh. Swaminathan immediately recognized Jangarh's genius and encouraged him to become a professional artist. Since then many Pardhan Gonds have followed in his footsteps. Thus Pardhan songs and oral traditions, which had for centuries been recited to accompany performances on the *bana* (a sacred fiddle), began to be depicted on paper and canvas, as well as in prominent mural commissions—such as on the facade of Madhya Pradesh's legislative assembly building, and on the domes of Bharat Bhavan (now weathered out). At Bharat Bhavan itself, Swaminathan ensured that the works by Pardhan Gonds occupied pride of place alongside the best creations of non-tribal, urban-

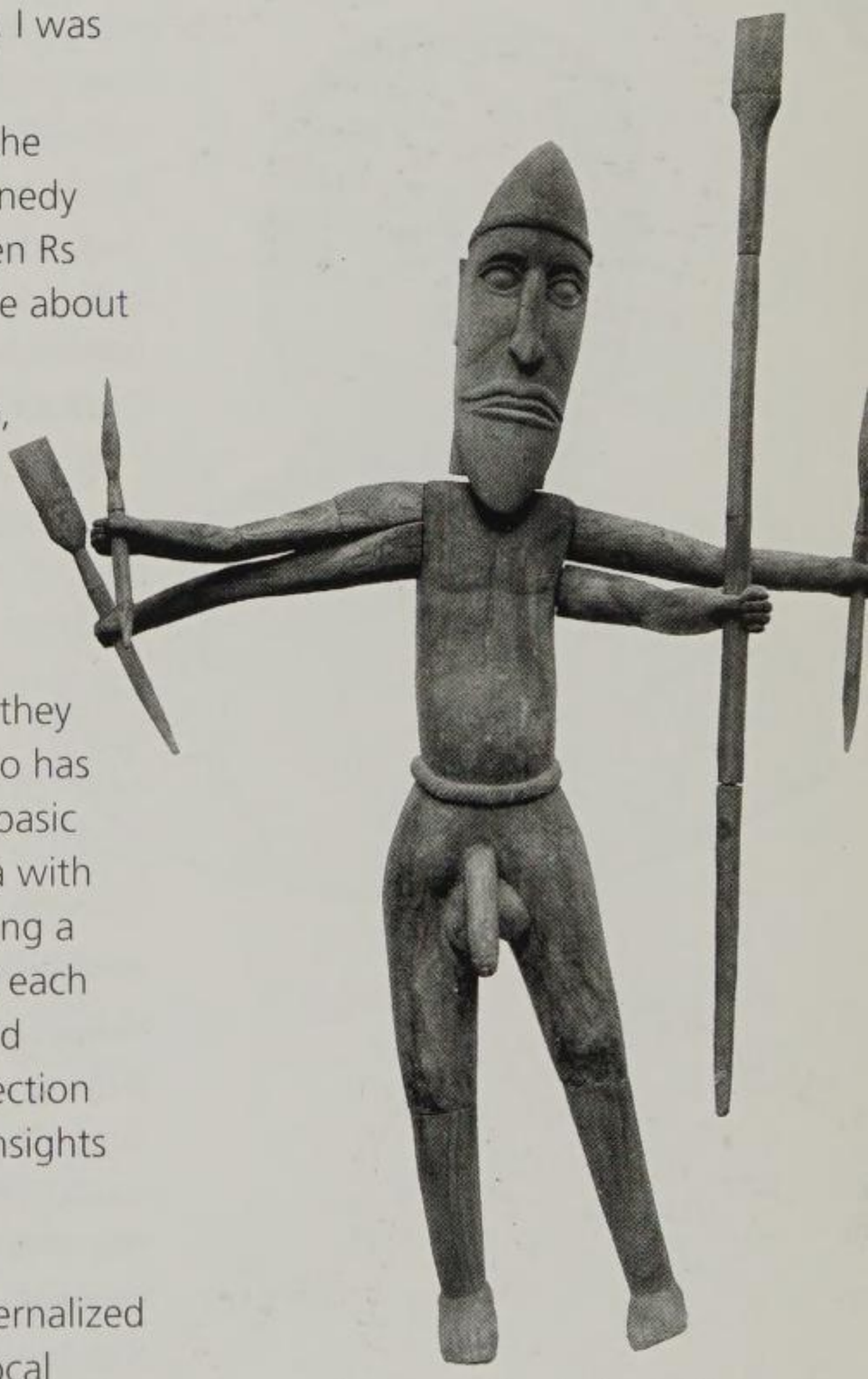


bound artists. This contemporary expression of Pardhan Gond art has been termed *Jangarh Kalam*, Jangarh Idiom, by poet Udayan Vajpeyi.

In 2001, Jangarh committed suicide under murky circumstances while working as an artist-in-residence at the Mithila Museum in Niigata, rural Japan. By then he had already brought to Bhopal's Professors Colony a wide array of Gond artists, among whom was the married couple Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam (whose sister Nankusia married Jangarh). They, in turn, continued to encourage other Gonds from their village and urban communities to seek a livelihood as professional visual artists, and have generously offered guidance and informal instruction from their modest home and workplace in Bhopal. For instance, during the making of this book, while nine persons lived in the Vyams' two-room household, including Subhash's nephew Sukhnandi Vyam and his family, there would be at least six visitors camping there—doing art, looking for work or just smoking marijuana. 'On a daily basis, 5 kilos of rice and 3 kilos of wheat flour are required in our kitchen,' Subhash once told me. It is the compulsion of supporting such large families that forces major artists like Durgabai or Subhash to be labeled 'craftspersons' and be huddled in 'tribal artist camps' in Delhi or Bangalore where they are offered sometimes a measly Rs 1,000 per day (USD 22) for doing hatched fish-scale patterns on a piece of paper, canvas, or – as it turned out once during the making of the book – paint on metal vases. The approach of some well-networked art aficionados in Delhi is sometimes no different from that of Nike's sweatshops in Vietnam. Tribal-origin artists – even when they can hold their own with their urban compatriots – are relegated to doing the decorative for a daily wage. After all, Jangarh Shyam, when he died in 2001 at the age of 40, was working for just Rs 12,000 a month in the alienating atmosphere of the Mithila Museum run by Tokio Hasegawa. According to art historian Yashodhara Dalmia, a backpacking Hasegawa stumbled upon the animated paintings of Madhubani artists in the 1980s, realized their worth, set up a lucrative business by importing these priceless works to Japan and eventually established a 'museum' in rural Japan. When I approached the Vyams, I was conscious of this history of exploitation that continues till date.


I am full of words that carry a sting. Characters who love caste, whose words contain poison, whose touch is venomous, speak through me.

In the course of producing *Bhimayana*, Navayana facilitated an exhibition for the brilliant young sculptor Sukhnandi Vyam (Subhash' nephew) at the Wieden+Kennedy gallery in Delhi (March–April 2010). The 17 pieces on display were priced between Rs 80,000 and Rs 2.5 lakh. Not one was sold, but a major statement had been made about the dignity of the artist. A contemporary (non-tribal) artist in Delhi, a self-styled 'collector of tribal art' who has even managed to put together a private museum, said she had been used to buying Gond and other tribal art works for Rs 500. Sukhnandi's show seemed to have shocked and disoriented her. Such exploiters lament the loss of 'innocence of tribal artists' and their 'commercialisation'.

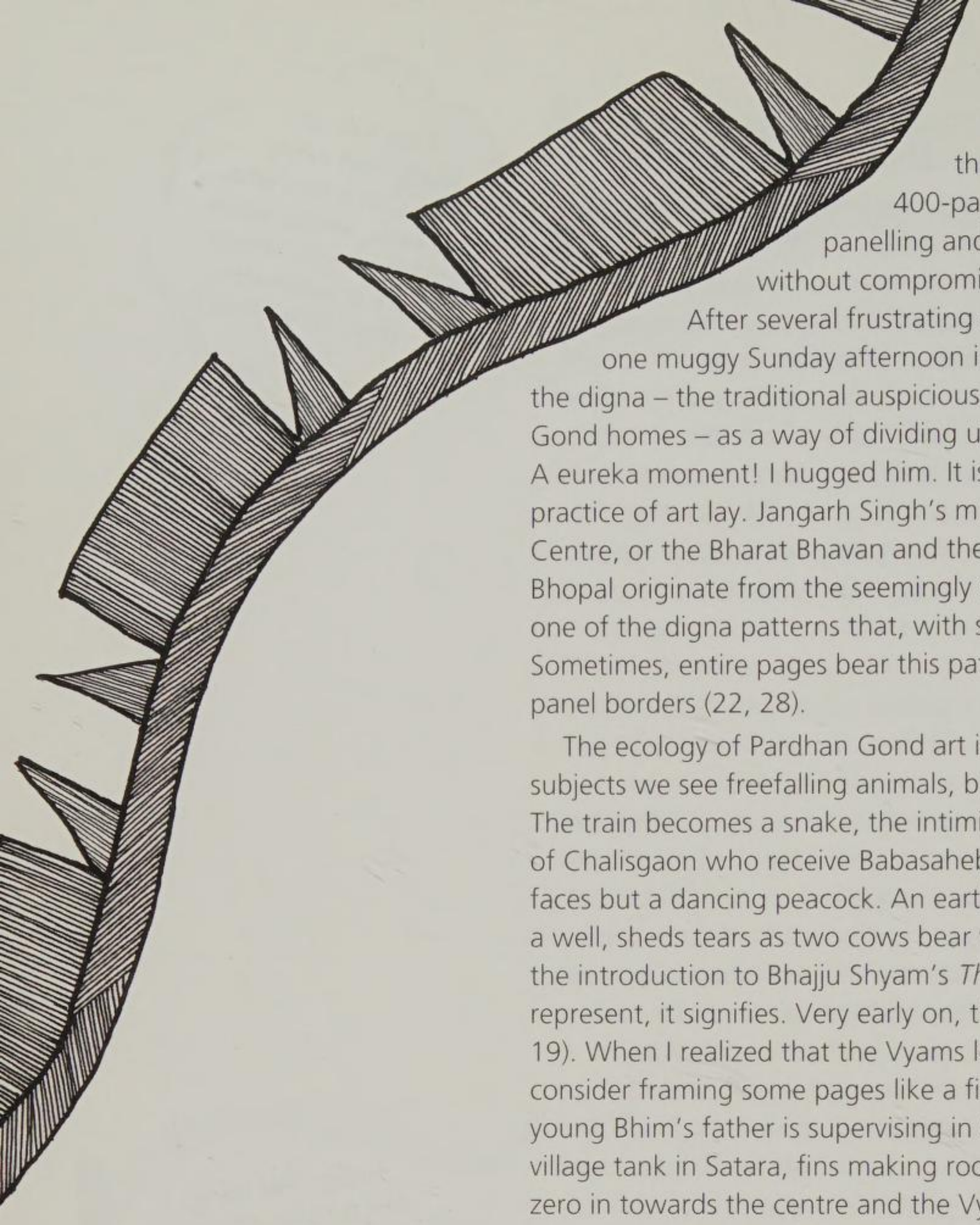


Sukhnandi Vyam's "Artist"

Framing Bhimayana

Just as the unlettered Vyams were unfamiliar with contemporary graphic books, they were unaware of Ambedkar. Their daughter Roshni, 14, an emerging artist – who has done the fish-style font and the numbers used for chapter headings – knew the basic facts though. She told them about the 'guy in the statue in the New Market area with one hand extended, index finger pointing to something afar, another hand holding a book.' Over several sessions, I narrated to them the storyboard, improvising with each telling. I left them with a hand-written Hindi version, for Roshni to read aloud and explain to them. I told them that the text was only a guide to give a sense of direction and they were free to do what they wished. Each brainstorming threw up new insights and also new dead-ends.

Soon, the Vyams were making Ambedkar's story their own. The humiliations Ambedkar faced affected them deeply. They were moved and angered. They internalized the stories. They began cutting out reports of Khairlanji-like incidents from the local papers. By April 2009, the first set of drawings emerged—they turned out to be all full-page works. As promised, there were no panels. Nor would they follow any of the storyboard's technical 'instructions'. We printed a 16-page sampler from the first section of the Water chapter where Bhim is denied water in school. A series of full-page



drawings made it appear like a picture book and threatened to result in an unwieldy and unaffordable 400-pager. We had to come up with an innovative way of panelling and yet not impose the tyranny of conventional panels, without compromising on the credo of not forcing people into boxes. After several frustrating and failed attempts, and months of brainstorming, one muggy Sunday afternoon in August 2009 Subhash suggested that we use the digna – the traditional auspicious design patterns applied to walls and floors in Gond homes – as a way of dividing up a page. He showed me how in rough sketches. A eureka moment! I hugged him. It is in the digna that the origins of Pardhan Gond practice of art lay. Jangarh Singh's murals that now adorn the walls of the Pompidou Centre, or the Bharat Bhavan and the Vidhan Sabha (legislative assembly) buildings in Bhopal originate from the seemingly simple digna. To the left of this page you will see one of the digna patterns that, with subtle variations, forms a leitmotif in *Bhimayana*. Sometimes, entire pages bear this pattern (34–37); at other times deft variations adorn panel borders (22, 28).

The ecology of Pardhan Gond art is such that even when dealing with urban subjects we see freefalling animals, birds and trees in landscapes without a horizon. The train becomes a snake, the intimidating fort a lion. The happiness of the people of Chalisgaon who receive Babasaheb Ambedkar (79) is not conveyed through smiling faces but a dancing peacock. An earthmover used by a dalit, who is killed for digging a well, sheds tears as two cows bear witness (46). As Sirish Rao and Gita Wolf write in the introduction to Bhajju Shyam's *The London Jungle Book* (2005), Gond art does not represent, it signifies. Very early on, the Vyams saw thirsty young Bhim as a fish (17, 19). When I realized that the Vyams loved portraying aquatic life, I suggested they could consider framing some pages like a fish. On page 25, a water tank whose construction young Bhim's father is supervising in Goregaon appears like a fish, as does the common village tank in Satara, fins making room for narrative text. In the preceding page, fishes zero in towards the centre and the Vyams offer an organic approach to paneling. The entire Chakwara story (54) becomes a fish. Ambedkar's historic Mahad speech on the dalit's basic human right to access water reaches the audience through loudspeakers that act as sprinklers—here we see one of the most imaginative and original uses of gutter space in the history of modern graphic art (48). In the next chapter, when a homeless Ambedkar ruminates over his fate in Baroda's Kamathi Garden, he becomes the park (68).

On several occasions Durga and Subhash would introduce narrative elements, situations and characters not provided for in the storyboard. So much that close to 40 percent of the text and dialogue was generated or re-edited to suit the drawings. For instance, page 82 has a neighing horse and four furious faces. In the previous panel, the sister-in-law of Namdeo (the first-time cart driver) blames the horse for tripping the cart and defends her kin. Durga says the horse would surely laugh at this. On page 66, Ambedkar's plight in Baroda is depicted like those of oxen that harness the oil-press, walking in circles and going nowhere. Each time you view a page in this book, you will discover new ways of seeing, new meanings, new pleasures, fresh insights.

Ambedkar's Missing Story

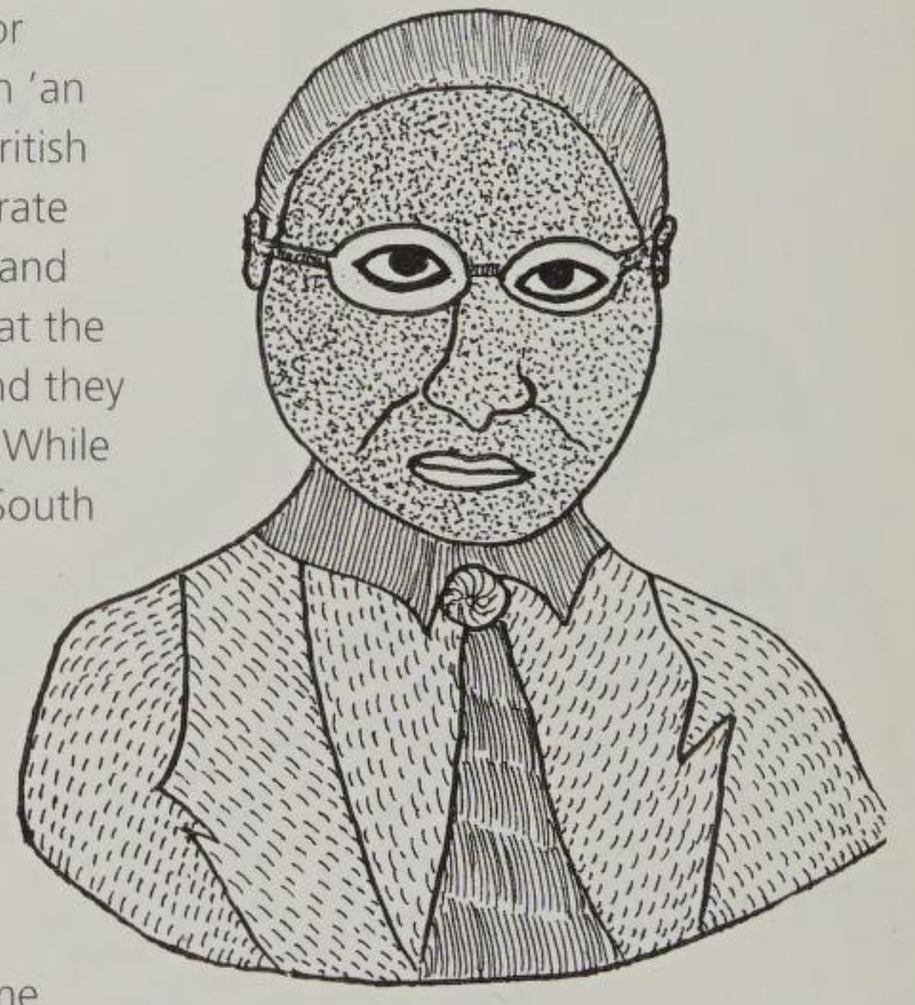
Navayana was launched in 2003 with *Ambedkar: Autobiographical Notes*, a little 36-page book priced at Rs 40 (about 1 USD back then). In the multi-volume *Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, edited by Vasant Moon, these writings can be found in Volume 12 under the title "Waiting for a Visa". The connection between the title and the six autobiographical 'illustrations' – as Ambedkar calls them – is not clear. Perhaps, Ambedkar intended adding more to this body of writing – of less than 10,000 words – but eventually could not. All that the editorial note by Moon says is: 'Here are some of the reminiscences drawn by Dr. Ambedkar in his own handwriting. The MSS traced in the collection of the People's Education Society were published by the society as a booklet on 19th March 1990.—ed.' If these are *some* reminiscences, were there more? What visa was Ambedkar waiting for? We can, however, gather from the content

that Ambedkar wrote at least a few of these available notes in 1935. In the second reminiscence, he refers to his return from London to work in Baroda in 1917. Towards the end of this section, he recalls that '18 years has not succeeded in fading away' the memory of the incidence of untouchability he experienced in the Parsi inn in Baroda. It is clear that Ambedkar jotted down several such 'illustrations' over the years, and perhaps many have been lost.

In the storyboard, Srividya Natarajan stuck to Ambedkar's versions of the episodes in letter and spirit but also created new characters and scenarios. In the first two chapters (Water and Shelter) the episodes drawn from Ambedkar's "Waiting for a Visa" are dated accurately, whereas some liberties have been taken with the dates of the events in the Travel chapter. The Mahad satyagraha story does not figure in "Visa", but was included because of its thematic connection. The Gandhi–Ambedkar confrontation at the Round Table Conference in 1931–32, the drafting of the Constitution and Ambedkar's turn to Buddhism have been included to give a sense of completion to Ambedkar's story.

In India today, as in the rest of the world, few outside the dalit movement are familiar with these experiences of Ambedkar. India's hidden apartheid has unfortunately not become a global concern. One of the iconic moments in the global history of anticolonial struggles is considered to be when, in 1893, a 24-year-old Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi is thrown out of the first-class compartment of a train in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, and he is, in his own words, 'accommodated in a tin compartment where Kaffirs are packed like sheep.' This incident – the horror of being 'degraded' to the level of 'bestial Kaffirs' – is believed to have spurred Gandhi towards his lifelong and tenacious struggle against colonial authority and discrimination. That Gandhi, as a resourceful young lawyer, could afford a first-class ticket in a foreign country is lost sight of. That Gandhi had to go all the way to South Africa to discover racial discrimination, whereas young Bhimrao encountered this as a 10-year-old in Satara, Bombay Presidency, in 1901, is forgotten.

In 1895, when Gandhi encounters two doors to the Durban post office – one for whites and the other shared by Indians and black Africans – he finds it offensive. In 'an appeal to the Indian public' on 14 August 1896, he laments the fate of 100,000 British Indians in South Africa: 'In the Durban Post and Telegraph offices there were separate entrances for natives and Asiatics, and Europeans. We felt the indignity too much and many respectable Indians were insulted and called all sorts of names by the clerks at the counter. We petitioned the authorities to do away with the invidious distinction and they have now provided three separate entrances for natives, Asiatics, and Europeans.' While touchable Gandhi who succeeded in furthering the cause of racial segregation in South Africa came to be recognized as a global anti-imperialism icon, untouchable Bhim who could not drink water in his local school and went on to lead the Mahad satyagraha in 1927 has been neglected by history.



Ambedkar talks of experiencing social equality for the first time in his life during his years in Columbia University; once back in India he is constantly reminded of his untouchability. For Gandhi, the script was played out in the opposite way—the experience of discrimination had to happen far from the social security and comfort that India provides its touchable classes. Today, the same Indian elite that bemoans racial violence and discrimination in Australia snuffs out the lives of two dalits every day. According to the National Crime Records Bureau's statistics for 2008, a crime is committed against a dalit every 18 minutes. On this, there's a chilling silence.

Bhimayana is a small effort to address this anomaly and make Ambedkar's story universal. If the lives and experiences of Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks, Nelson Mandela and Malcolm X could resonate universally, Ambedkar's – and those of millions of dalits in India – ought to as well. After this 'unusually beautiful' rendering of Bhim's story by Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam, there can be no reason not to engage.

Jai Bhim!

S. ANAND

I started making dignas at the age of six—using different kinds of clay to draw colourful patterns on walls during festivals and weddings. I've done art work for several books, primarily for children. *The Night Life of Trees*, coauthored by me, won the BolognaRagazzi Award in 2008. I have handled a wide range of themes—from our Gond gods to the horror of the Bhopal gas leak. I really enjoyed drawing Ambedkar's life along with my husband Subhash. While doing the book I once told Anand, this is like the *Ramayana*! He said, 'No, this is ***Bhimayana***'—and that's how we hit upon this title.

DURGABAI VYAM

SUBHASH VYAM

I should say something about myself? Sorry, my number's always busy. Ok, wait... I started working with clay at the age of 10. I used to sculpt in wood. I gave that up since there were no buyers for bulky sculpture. I've since been doing paintings on canvas and paper. Once we cracked a way of doing the panels, the Ambedkar project gave us a lot of scope to experiment with—fusing colours with black for instance. This is my first book and I'm glad Durga and I did this together.

SRIVIDYA NATARAJAN

I was born in Chennai, India, and now live in London, Canada, and teach English and Creative Writing at King's University College. I trained as a Bharatanatyam dancer, and I've illustrated books for children. My first novel, *No Onions Nor Garlic* (2006), was a comic satire on caste. I've just finished writing my second novel, *Undoing Dance*, and have storyboarded Jotirao Phule's revolutionary 1873 text *Slavery*.

S. ANAND

I'd been a journalist for ten years. Late in 2003, in a moment of madness, and conspiring with my lend-an-idea friend Ravikumar, we started Navayana. He sat me on a tiger and I haven't been able to get off it. It was Ravi who planted the idea of an imaginative visual treatment of Ambedkar's "Waiting for a Visa" in my head.

APARAJITA NINAN

As a graphic design student, I worked as an intern with Navayana in 2009–10 towards a graphic book on Phule's *Slavery*. I love drawing with my hand and enjoyed creating the font 'Bhim' for this book.

This work would not have been possible
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Akila Seshasayee, Joe Sacco, John Berger, Arundhati Roy

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Rajni Vyam, Mansingh Vyam, Saroj Vyam, Sachin Vyam
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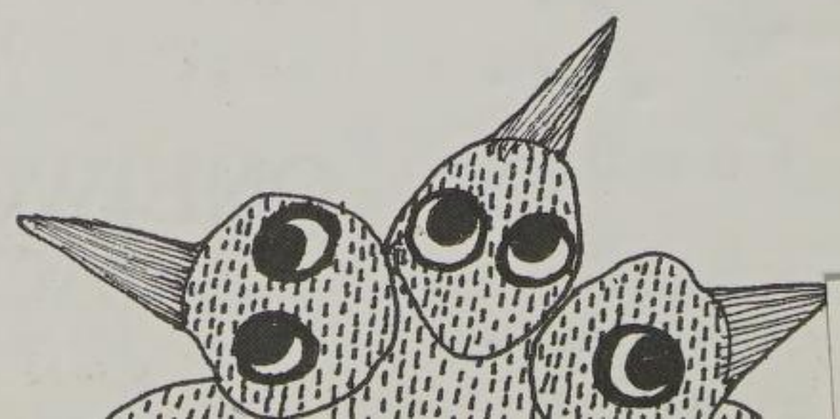

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The artists Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam have dropped most of the West's and manga's typical comics conventions and boldly use of their own artistic heritage, the Pardhan Gond tradition, to craft a distinctive graphic biography of one of India's bravest and greatest leaders, Bhimrao Ambedkar, an 'untouchable' and a fierce critic of Gandhi. Heavy in symbolism and motifs, *Bhimayana* is challenging in all the right ways and still conveys with flair who Ambedkar was and why his revolutionary ideas about the caste system still matter so much to the India of today.

JOE SACCO
author of *Palestine*

The story of the life of Bhimrao Ambedkar, one of India's most important thinkers, has been deliberately sidelined for decades. *Bhimayana* re-tells it in the most unusually beautiful way. It is unforgettable.

ARUNDHATI ROY
author of *The God of Small Things*

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navayana

What does it mean to be an untouchable in India? Why do some Indians despise the touch of others? Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891–1956), one of India's foremost revolutionaries, recounts his experiences of growing up untouchable and being routinely discriminated against: in school at the age of 10, in Baroda after his return from Columbia University, and while traveling. Battling odds, Ambedkar drafted the Constitution of India and eventually embraced Buddhism. Experiences similar to Ambedkar's continue to haunt a majority of India's 170 million dalits. They are still denied water, shelter and the basic dignities of life.

In this ground-breaking work, Pardhan-Gond artists Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam interweave historical events like the Mahad satyagraha with contemporary incidents. Defying conventional grammar, they infuse fresh energy into the graphic idiom through their magical art mounted on an epic scale.

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